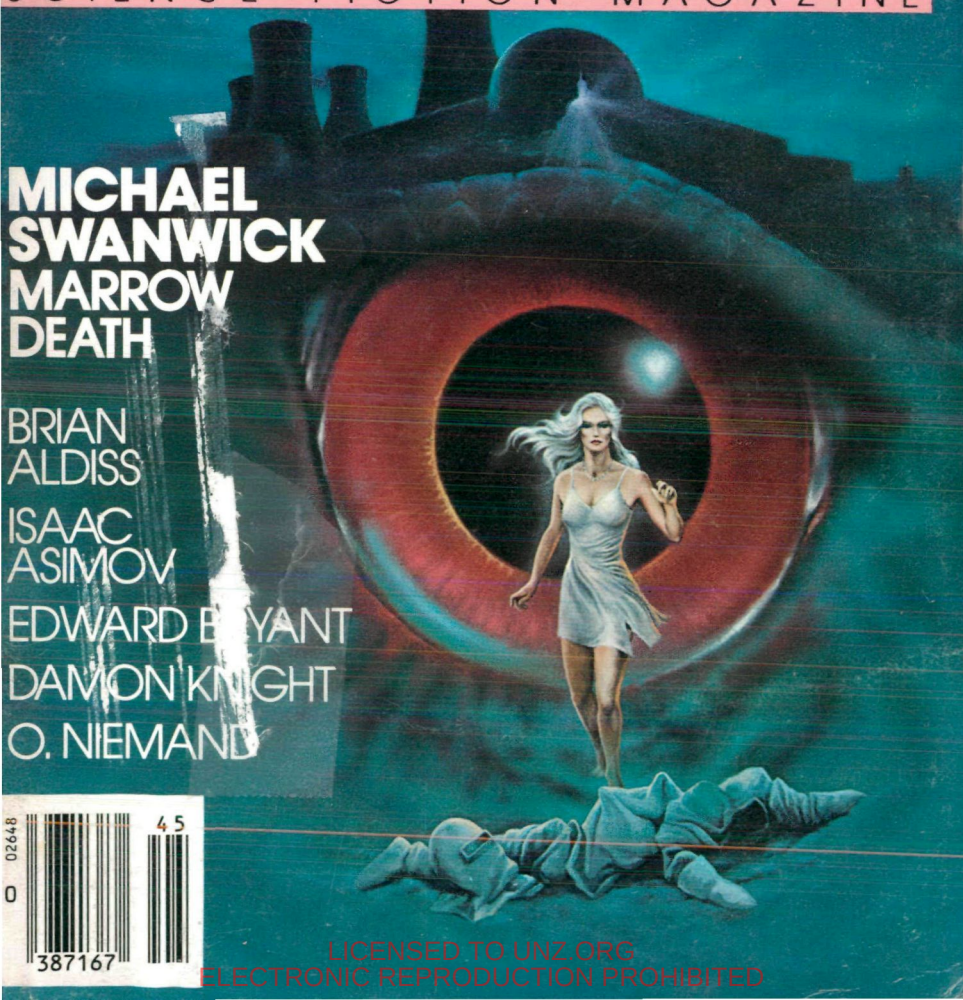
ISAAC ASIMOV'S

MID-DECEMBER 1984 $2.00

SCIENCE • FICTION • MAGAZINE



MICHAEL SWANWICK
MARROW DEATH

BRIAN ALDISS
ISAAC ASIMOV
EDWARD BRYANT
DAMON KNIGHT
O. NIEMAND

0 02648 45
387167

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

From cancer cures to germ warfare, from life extension to genocide, nothing any longer seems impossible to the men and women who have learned to control life itself. *Aubade for Gamelon*, a novel about the birth of the race that will—perhaps—replace our own, is for the New Biology what the works of Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein have been for physics and space travel.

AUBADE FOR GAMELON

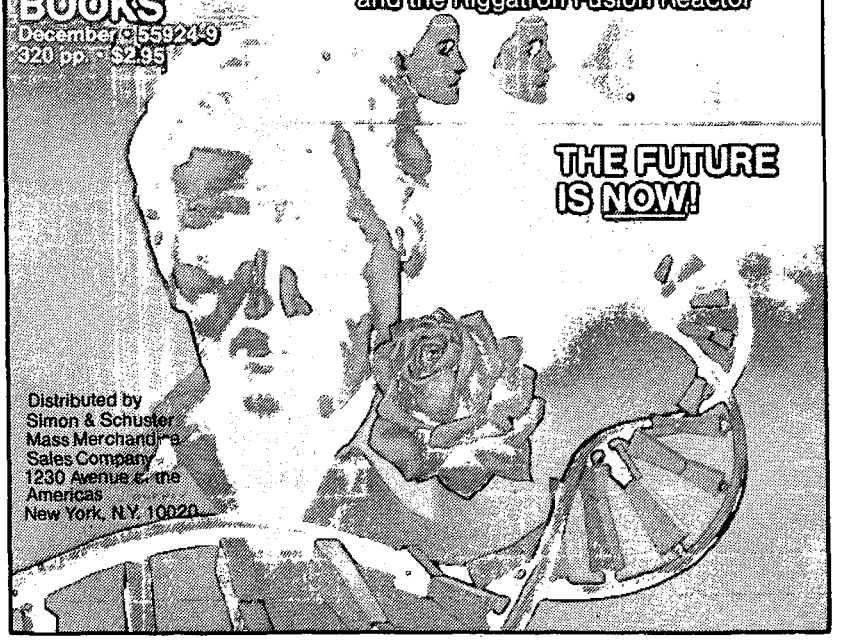
JOHN WILLETT

A novel about the birth of the race that will—perhaps—replace our own.

"One of the best science fiction novels I have read in ten years"
—Dr. Robert Bussard, inventor of the Bussard Interstellar Ramjet and the Riggatron Fusion Reactor

BAEN BOOKS
December c 55924-9
320 pp $2.95

THE FUTURE IS NOW!



Distributed by
Simon & Schuster
Mass Merchandise
Sales Company
1230 Avenue of the
Americas
New York, N.Y. 10020

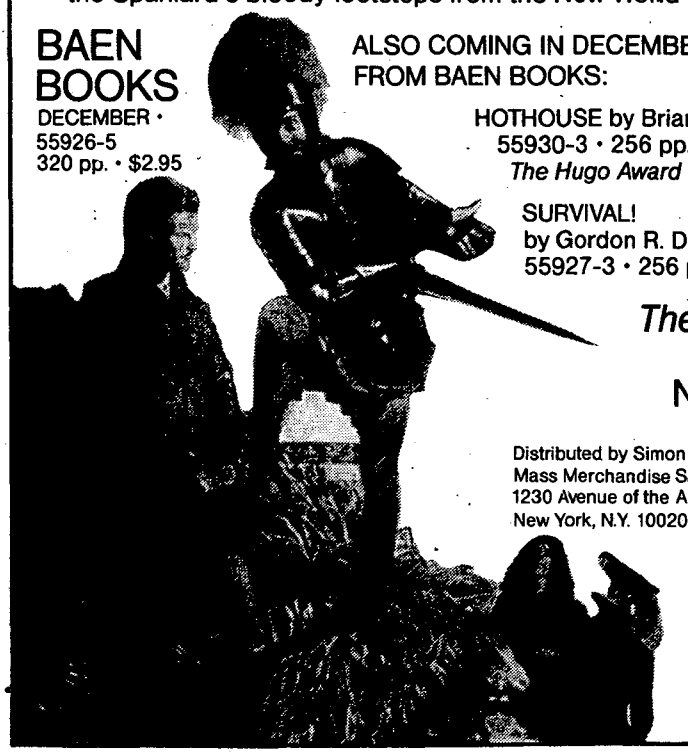
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY MAN FACES THE ARMIES OF CORTEZ—IN

THE OTHER TIME

MACK REYNOLDS WITH DEAN ING

A step in an old direction—a moment of dizziness—and archeologist Dan Fielding found himself four hundred years in the past. He was still in the Mexican desert... but it was the desert of the 16th century, and Mexico was in the grip of the *conquistador* Hernando Cortez. The course of history had to change— for the land that would one day become the U.S. would be Cortez's next conquest...unless Fielding could erase the Spaniard's bloody footsteps from the New World forever.



BAEN BOOKS

DECEMBER •
55926-5
320 pp. • $2.95

ALSO COMING IN DECEMBER FROM BAEN BOOKS:

HOTHOUSE by Brian W. Aldiss
55930-3 • 256 pp. • $2.95
The Hugo Award winner!

SURVIVAL!
by Gordon R. Dickson
55927-3 • 256 pp. • $2.75

The future is NOW!

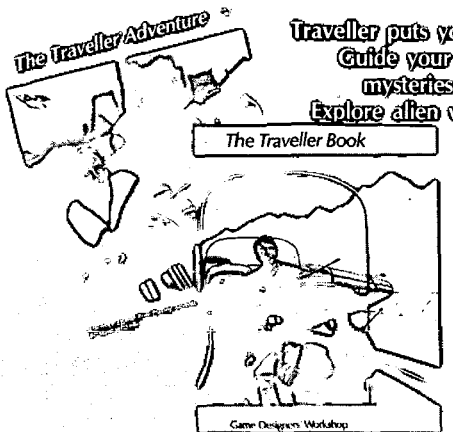
Distributed by Simon & Schuster
Mass Merchandise Sales Company
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10020

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Put yourself in the story!

TRAVELLER®

Science-Fiction Adventure in the Far Future



Traveller puts you in the middle of the action! Guide your favorite character through the mysteries and dangers of the far future. Explore alien worlds, puzzle out the enigmas of ancient civilizations, conduct complicated confidence scams, smuggle, build empires, lead revolutions, wage interstellar war . . . the list of science fiction role-playing adventures is as unlimited as your own imagination.

The Traveller Book

Complete rules, background, advice for players and referees, scenarios, and two short adventures.

The Traveller Adventure

A series of interwoven scenarios and adventures among the worlds of the Spinward Marches.

There are more than forty books, boxed sets, modules, supplements, adventures, and games for Traveller, with new material appearing regularly. Traveller is available from better book, game, and hobby retailers around the world.

Game Designers' Workshop

P.O. Box 1646, Bloomington, Illinois 61701

Free catalog on request.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

134

114

42

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

Vol. 8 No. 13 (whole no. 86)
Mid-December 1984
Next issue on sale
December 18, 1984

Novellas

42 Pilots of the Twilight — Edward Bryant
134 Marrow Death — Michael Swanwick

Short Stories

94 Dashing Through the Snow — Isaac Asimov
108 The Very Objectionable Mr. Clegg — Damon Knight
114 The Gods in Flight — Brian Aldiss
126 The Day the Invaders Came — O. Niemand

Departments

6 Editorial: Catastrophes — Isaac Asimov
11 Letters
17 Mooney's Module — Gerry Mooney
20 It's All Done with Mirrors — Martin Gardne
22 Gaming — Dana Lombardy
26 Viewpoint: Don't Worry, It's Only Science Fiction — H. Bruce Franklin
186 On Books — Baird Searles
194 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Poems by Robert Frazier

Cover art for "Marrow Death" by Linda Burr

Joel Davis: President & Publisher Isaac Asimov: Editorial Directo
Shawna McCarthy: Editor

Published 13 times a year by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.00 per copy. Annu subscription of thirteen issues $19.50 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In o other countries $24.20, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 1933, Marion, OH 43305. Ad dress for all editorial matters; Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY NY 10017. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademar of Davis Publications, Inc. ℗ 1984 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave New York, NY 10017. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secure under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction o use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; th publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class po tage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third cla postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send form 3579 to IAsfm, Box 193, Marion OH 43306. In Canada return to 625 Monmouth Rd., Windsor, Ontario N8Y3L
ISSN 0162-2188.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

CATASTROPHES

In my editorial in the May, 1984, issue, I listed a few examples of pseudoscientific nonsense and included, among them, Velikovskianism. I was not surprised to get a letter denouncing me for that. Here is one of the things the letter-writer said:

"There is still a flailing out at a Velikovsky cult. I doubt if there is any such group in existence. . . . He could be let to rest in peace."

Alas, there *is* an active Velikovsky cult. If anyone doesn't believe that, let him denounce it in print as I, on occasion, do, and then sit back and wait for the letters.

And I am perfectly willing to allow Immanuel Velikovsky rest in peace. There remain, however, his *ideas* that are still alive and are upheld with emotional fervor by a bunch of fringers (i.e. those who are to be found on the scientific fringe) and which, as a rational scientist, I am compelled to fight.

I would be glad not to label those ideas "Velikovskianism" and thus allow their originator to sink into peaceful oblivion, but his supporters use his name freely in connection with those ideas, and I have no choice but to do the same.

The letter-writer also denounces what he calls "gradualism" but what is more often called "uniformitarianism" by historians of science. Let me explain.

In the early 1800s there were two views of the history of the Earth. One was upheld by a French scientist, Georges Cuvier. He studied fossils with great skill and is the revered father of paleontology. However, he was also a fervently religious Protestant and, while recognizing the great age the Earth had to have, he could not abandon the opening chapters of Genesis. He suggested, therefore, that every once in a while the Earth was subjected to a vast flood that wiped out life. There followed a new creation. The Bible, he maintained, dealt only with the most recent creation, while the fossils were remnants of earlier creations. In making this suggestion he lent his great (and deserved) prestige to the idea of "catastrophism," first advanced a half-century earlier by a Swiss naturalist, Charles Bonnet.

On the other hand, a Scottish geologist, Charles Lyell, published a three-volume book between 1830 and 1833, in which he marshalled the evidence in favor of a steady and *uniform* evolution of the Earth—a uniform laying down of sediments, of erosion of mountains,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and so on—with no interruption of life-destroying catastrophes. In this book, he popularized the idea of "uniformitarianism" first advanced nearly half a century earlier by another Scottish geologist, James Hutton. It can be called "gradualism," if one wishes.

In the controversy that followed Lyell won out. As the fossil record was studied more extensively and intensively, it became clear that at no time since life first came into being some 3.5 billion years ago did any catastrophe take place that wiped out all of life and made a new creation necessary.

My letter-writer says "Gradualism . . . is dead . . . A reformation has converted the scientific world. Velikovsky could feel right at home." The implication is that Velikovsky back in the 1950s introduced the idea of catastrophes again, and that although scientists denounced him, they have quietly accepted all sorts of catastrophes (my letter-writer lists a few) and produced a Velikovskian world.

This, of course, is a distortion that arises, I believe, out of ignorance rather than malevolence.

Extreme uniformitarianism is not true, and never was. The notion that no catastrophes at all exist cannot be and never has been maintained. Even Hutton knew of volcanic eruptions and of earthquakes. To be sure, since the time of Hutton and Lyell, we have learned of new catastrophic events they knew nothing about. Ice ages are catastrophes; large meteor strikes are catastrophes; novas and supernovas are catastrophes; but these were discovered and appreciated long before Velikovsky.

DR. THOMAS C. RAINBOW
1954–1984

It is with deepest sorrow and regret that we tell you that the witty, informative, and popular Tom Rainbow died in a tragic accident on September 6, 1984.

His Viewpoint columns were among the magazine's most popular features, and at the time of his death were beginning to garner him nationwide attention. At the recent World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles, I was asked about "that crazy Tom Rainbow" more than about any other columnist. His "serious" work in neuroscience at the University of Pennsylvania was also going extremely well—he'd just been awarded a five-year NIH grant in order to further pursue his research.

In the next issue you will find his Viewpoint on Superintelligence, and in future issues you'll find his ruminations on Sex-change and Science Fiction, Love Potions, and How to Become a Mad Scientist. We cannot sufficiently express our sorrow that these will be the last of the series. The field has lost an immensely promising writer and the world has lost an even more promising scientist.

The Thomas C. Rainbow fund for Neuroscience has been established in his memory at the University of Pennsylvania. Readers who wish to make a donation are asked to contact this magazine for futher information.

— Shawna McCarthy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What's more, paleontologists have discovered periods of "great dyings," during which many species of organisms suddenly became extinct for no clear reason, but possibly in response to some catastrophe. The most dramatic such incident involves the disappearance of the dinosaurs (and many other forms of life) at the end of the Cretaceous, 65,000,000 years ago. Nowadays, some paleontologists suggest that such great dyings take place regularly at 26,000,000-year intervals. They wonder if this might be caused by the gravitational upset of a distant cloud of comets thought to exist far beyond Pluto's orbit. As a result of this upset, large numbers of comets move toward the inner solar system, and a few inevitably hit the Earth; hence the great dyings.

Someone once declared war to consist of long stretches of boredom interrupted by short intervals of stark terror. In the same way, the evolution of the Earth consists of long stretches of uniform development interrupted by brief catastrophes—where those catastrophes have never yet been large enough to wipe out all of life, so that evolution remains continuous, as Lyell maintained and Cuvier denied. Consequently, Lyell is still right and Cuvier still wrong.

Now then, what Velikovsky did was not to argue catastrophism versus uniformitarianism on some general basis. He insisted on a *particular* catastrophe. He suggested that about 1500 B.C., a massive object was hurled out of Jupiter, passed near the Earth, produced all the plagues described in the Book of Exodus, rained manna on Earth

ISAAC ASIMOV:
Editorial Director
SHAWNA McCARTHY:
Editor
SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Associate Editor
AMY STOUT:
Editorial Assistant
RALPH RUBINO:
Corporate Art Director
GERRY HAWKINS:
Associate Art Director
TERRI CZECZKO:
Art Editor
MARIANNE WELDON:
Associate Designer
CARL BARTEE:
Director of Manufacturing
CAROLE DIXON:
Production Manager
LAUREN C. COUNCIL:
Production Assistant
CYNTHIA MANSON:
Subsidiary Rights Manager
BARBARA BAZYN:
Permissions & Contracts Manager
MICHAEL DILLON:
Circulation Director Retail Marketing
PAUL PEARSON:
Newsstand Operations Manager
KATHY TULLY-CESTARO:
Circulation Manager Subscriptions
WILLIAM F. BATTISTA:
Advertising Director
JAMIE FILLON:
Advertising Manager
IRENE BOZOKI:
Classified Advertising Manager

ADVERTISING OFFICES
NEW YORK
(212) 557-9100

JOEL DAVIS
President and Publisher

LEONARD F. PINTO
Vice President
&
General Manager

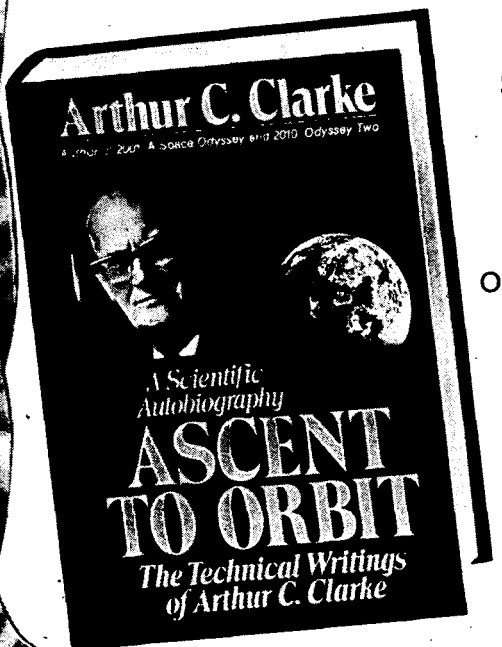
PAULA COLLINS
Vice President
Circulation

FRED EDINGER
Vice President
Finance

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *IAsfm*, Davis Publications, Inc. 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

An Excellent Gift



$19.95

240 pp. Illustrated

At bookstores everywhere...

Or, to order by phone,
CALL TOLL FREE
1 800 526-5368

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
605 Third Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10158

In Canada:
22 Worcester Road
Rexdale
Ontario M9W 1L1

Prices subject to change and higher in Canada.

092 5-1542

to feed the fleeing Israelites, at one point stopped the rotation of the Earth when Joshua ordered the Sun to stand still, and then started it again with the same rate as before. The object returned later to bring about certain miracles described in the Book of Isaiah and then settled down to a nearly circular orbit as the planet, Venus. All this he based on vague legends, myths, and medieval wonder-tales.

Any reasonably educated scientist with a sense of humor would, when Velikovsky first published his book, *Worlds in Collision*, in the 1950s, have burst out laughing, and many did. They are *still* laughing. Scientists *without* a sense of humor, upon witnessing the manner in which the newspapers and magazines fell upon Velikovsky's views and treated them as "science," were outraged, and are still outraged.

I was one of the laughers, and wrote a review that hilariously ripped the book into shreds —whereupon the newspaper that had requested the review refused to publish it. (It was not Velikovsky who was censored, but the anti-Velikovskians, believe me.) And I laugh now, too. Velikovsky's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ideas are, from top to bottom, a load of bat guano. He, himself, however, is an interesting writer and, apparently, a sincere and resolute man. I have nothing against him personally, only against his ideas.

Nothing that astronomers, geologists, and biologists have discovered, either before or since Velikovsky published his book, has in any way supported the specific catastrophe the man described. The discovery of *other* types of catastrophes at *other* times, based on physical evidence more sensible than ancient fiction, has nothing to do with Velikovskianism, does not support it, and does not create a world in which Velikovsky would "feel right at home."

There is one person with whom Velikovskians are more annoyed than they are with me, and that is Carl Sagan. To be sure, my letter-writer can't resist mentioning him, although mildly, and without any really hard words. My letter-writer doesn't seem to be a bad sort of fellow. He's wrong, but we all manage to be wrong once in a while.

In the same issue in which my editorial mentioning Velikovskianism appeared, there was also a Viewpoint article by Carl Sagan entitled "The Nuclear Winter."

That elicited a letter from a *different* reader altogether, a letter that was far less benign, and which was handwritten in a passion. I gathered the writer was furious at Carl and at all nuclear freeze people and, in fact, at anyone who had a bad word to say for nuclear war.

That saddens me. Are there people who feel it is unpatriotic to do anything that would make it difficult to fight a nuclear war? Are there people who feel that it is important to hurl nuclear destruction at the "Evil Empire" even if it means having nuclear destruction hurled at us? Are there people whose chests would swell with pride as they watch Earth go down to oblivion, feeling that to be a small price to pay for the privilege of seeing an enemy destroyed, and delighting in being able to watch, with dying eyes, that destruction of ourselves, our friends and our allies, and perhaps most or all of the rest of life?

When Patrick Henry said, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" he was speaking of himself personally. Each man has the right to assert his own values for himself —but not for the whole world.

I know not what course others may take, but as for me, let the Earth, and life, and humanity remain and flourish, whatever happens to me. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS

Dear Isaac and Shawna,

June. What an incredible month! What a great issue! First off, there was the cover art. Wow! More Wayne Barlowe, please! With art like this gracing your cover and inside pages, the magazine is truly one of the best-looking on the stands. The cover catches my eye every time, especially when it is a Barlowe cover. You mention in the letters that Shawna has married a Mr. Barlowe. I can only hope that it is the same man, [It is.] or even a close relative, to the person who does those fabulous covers. I want more!

Octavia Butler's cover story was great. Ever since her book, *Mind of my Mind*, I have been craving more and more of her work. Let's hope that these two stories, the other being "Speech Sounds," constitute a trend in her writing.

Clarifying Clarion—so that's what goes on at that infamous workshop! I have seen so many 'this-was-started-while-at-Clarion' blurbs for stories that I was wondering how it all happened. Mr. Budrys was exactly right—you can't teach writing, but you sure can teach writers. If I had gone to such a workshop I would now be saving much in postage and pride from all the stupid mistakes that crop up in my stories.

"Medra" was up to Tanith Lee's usual excellent standards, and left me wanting more. I hope there will never be a day when I find any of her work un-enjoyable.

The ending of "The Pool of Manhead Song" simply staggered me. What a neat tale! More Cunningham in the future, I hope.

The rest of the stories/articles/puzzles were up to your usual high standards. I must say that at first I had some reservations when Ms. McCarthy took over the helm, but she has proved herself many times over to be an outstanding editor and kept the magazine alive. Congratulations.

Now, let me skip back, if you will, to the letters section. Over the past few issues there has been the usual outburst of those most puzzling of all questions—format, Profiles, and Viewpoints. I couldn't care less if this magazine arrived packed in a brown wrapper and written on old grocery sacks with orange crayon. I do not read the mag because I like the way it is formated or the size of it or how well the black letters contrast against the white page, I buy it for one thing and one thing only—the stories. As long as the stories are good, I don't care about contents, the art, or anything else. The writing is in the story, not in how it is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

printed. And as for Profiles and Viewpoints, go ahead and stick 'em in whenever you want to. I know that they first had to pass over Shawna's desk, and therefore they must be worth reading.

Once again, thanks for the usual—a fabulous issue.

Paul Strain
Tilton, IL

We are sometimes accused of publishing only favorable letters, but we can only suppose the accusers never read the letter column. Now if we did *publish only favorable letters, the above is exactly the kind of letter we would publish. Thank you, Mr. Strain.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Your story, "The Evil Drink Does," in the May 1984 issue of *IAsfm* was entertaining. However, Hank Jankus' illustration on pages 26–27, reproduced on the contents page, gave away the ending. He drew a figure considerably more fully upholstered than the textual description of the original condition of the unfortunate heroine. Clues in the story line are fine, but don't let the art work spoil the writer's efforts prematurely!

Sincerely yours,

Thomas H. Falconer
Saugus, CA

I don't think so. Ishtar was just made to look toothsomely buxom.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir:

Readers of Carl Sagan's "Viewpoint: The Nuclear Winter," *IAsfm* no. 77, would do well to accept with a grain of salt his conclusion that a nuclear war must kill most of mankind. A careful reading of the base TTAPS model in *Science* 222 shows that the conclusion depends upon a number of crucial assumptions. Vital assumptions apparent to the layman include the average dust particle size, the height of smoke plumes, and the absence of atmospheric disturbances which could accelerate rainout. The scientific community has not yet had time to critically examine and respond to TTAPS. Finally, it might be well to remember that while Dr. Sagan is an eminent scientist, he is also an active citizen with strongly held political opinions.

Sincerely,

Richard Bean
P. O. Box 751
Freeland, WA 98249

Well then, how do you propose to settle the matter of assumptions? Shall we have a nuclear war and test out whether these assumptions or some others are accurate? Sagan's assumptions are not ridiculous ones; they may be right—and the mere possibility of their being right is enough (in my view) to make it insane to contemplate a nuclear war. And what is wrong with Sagan having strongly held political opinions? I suspect you have them, too, and does that mean we can assume your views are guided by them and are worth nothing?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Shawna,

Ten minutes ago I finished read-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A new novel of the Diadem

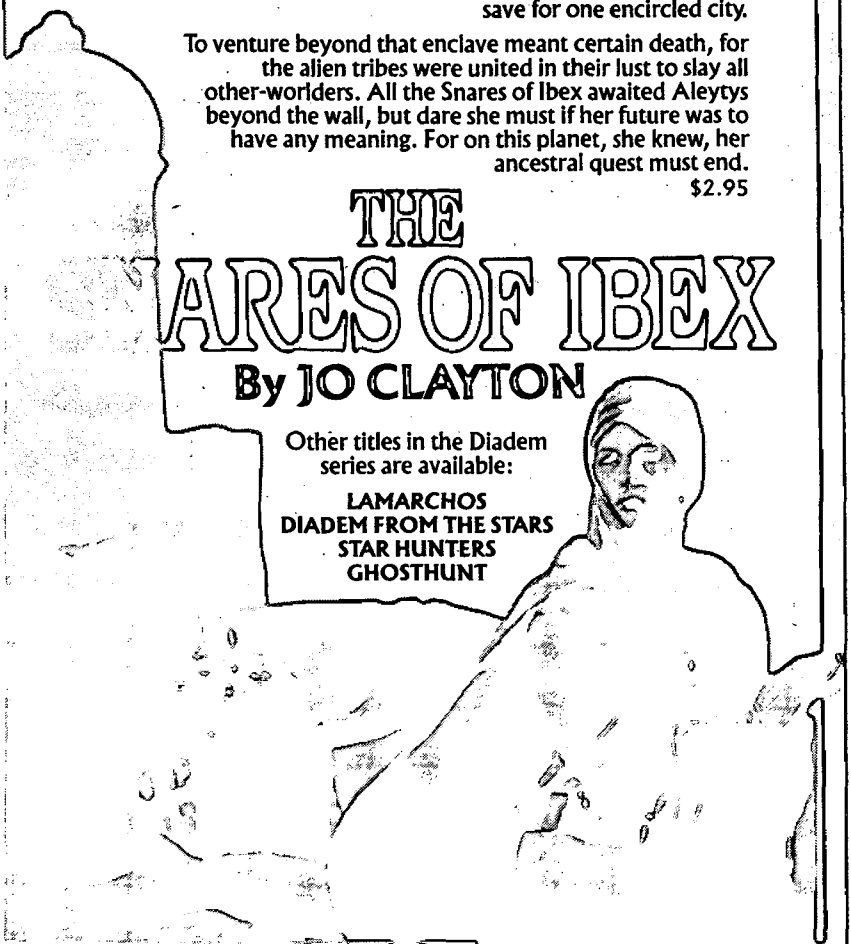
Searching for her estranged, superwoman mother across the inhabited galaxy, Aleytys—wearer of the Diadem—finds herself on Ibex: an unmapped world banned to outsiders, save for one encircled city.

To venture beyond that enclave meant certain death, for the alien tribes were united in their lust to slay all other-worlders. All the Snares of Ibex awaited Aleytys beyond the wall, but dare she must if her future was to have any meaning. For on this planet, she knew, her ancestral quest must end.

$2.95

THE SNARES OF IBEX

By JO CLAYTON



Other titles in the Diadem series are available:

LAMARCHOS
DIADEM FROM THE STARS
STAR HUNTERS
GHOSTHUNT

The Exclusive Science Fiction and Fantasy Line Selected by DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

DAW SCIENCE FICTION

Distributed by NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

LIGHTLY FOUND.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing John Varley's "Press Enter" and, although I've never written to an editor or author before, this time I feel compelled to offer my thanks. It's been a long time since any story has affected me as deeply as this.

So—my deepest thanks to you, the author, and anyone else that helped in bringing this bit of pleasure to me. With this quality of writing I foresee many more awards in Mr. Varley's future and because of his inclusion in your magizine I've decided on a three-year subscription renewal.

Sincerely,

R. Wilsey
Thornton, CO

There's no doubt about it. Varley is a great writer. I'm glad he wasn't around when I was young. I would have hated to have had to compete with him. Heinlein and Clarke were bad enough.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editors,

It seems to me that readers often passionately dislike certain stories as much as they like other stories. It also seems that therefore, there ought to be an easier way (other than the Letters section) for the readers to tell the editors what kind of stories they would like to see more of and what kind they would not.

I was thinking about how this could be achieved when I recalled reading somewhere that *Astounding*, in the days of Campbell, used to run something called *Anlab*. *Anlab* apparently tabulated readers' preferences in stories, and then (I gather) printed which stories had been most popular, etc. . .

Why not do something similar today?

Yours,

Colin Leslie
Victoria, BC

The trouble with the Analytical Laboratory was that not enough readers took the trouble to vote. The result was that a very small percentage of "activists" skewed the results. This is also true of readers' letters, which is why, in the last analysis, Shawna must use her own judgement.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I've just finished reading your June '84 editorial and feel the urge to comment. Like the reader who was offended by Michael Bishop's "The Gospel According to Gamaliel Crucis," I am a Christian too. I've been reading SF for nearly twenty years now and I understand the indignant reader's concern. SF, more so it seems than most other genres, often wanders from the path of Christian principle. Therefore, a suggestion to those who, like me, can't bear to part ways with either their religious beliefs or the excellent SF being written today. As you so truthfully put it, Doctor: "There will always be differences of opinion, often based upon emotion rather than reason. . . ."

Just so, the offensive aspects of SF need not be forced upon anyone. The option I choose is to simply dismiss those concepts which disagree with my beliefs and concentrate instead on what is (usually)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a good story or book. If one is strong enough in his faith he need not automatically censure fiction that doesn't agree with his beliefs. Very occasionally I run across a story that is too strongly against my dogma to enjoy. I simply skip over the offending story and go on to the next one. I think it would be best for overly sensitive readers to inure themselves against *being* overly sensitive; it's a tough world out there only if one allows reason to be overcome by emotion.

I want to point out that by the same token, there is much SF published today that embraces such basic Christian concepts as love, empathy, understanding, selflessness etc. It's a shame to miss out entirely on some good, thought-provoking literature simply because the theme or some of the concepts don't agree with one's beliefs. Yours,

Bernard Wingerter

P.S. You claim, Doctor, that you have never encountered "any convincing evidence of the existence of the biblical God" and you most certainly never will . . . if God allowed himself to be detected through the lens of a microscope or within the shallow confines of human reasoning, where would the choice of free will be?

I consider your viewpoint enlightened. Thank you. Admittedly, God might not allow himself to be detected by ordinary instruments, but you can say that about any entity you wish—ghosts, fairies, ghouls, etc. To believe in the existence of the indetectable opens the doors to infinite belief—and that's not for me.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

I was most disappointed recently when I discovered that Mooney's Modules had been bypassed in the latest issue of *Asimov's* Magazine!! This is not the first time you let your faithful readers down by not publishing MM—a regular feature I really look forward to each month. Please keep the readers in mind next month when it's decided whether or not you will run Mooney's Modules or I will never buy another *Asimov's* Magazine!

Sincerely,

Mrs. Cathy Schultz
East Patchogue, NY

Ah, if only type were compressible, we'd squeeze Mooney in every month—but sometimes something has to give.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

In your June 1984 issue: "Medra," by Tanith Lee: on page 72, the author says Jaxon's gold ring will reveal the nature of the girl "from a distance of three hundred feet."

He gets into a hover car, which clearly transports him toward the hotel at only a little above ground level. When he is 200 feet from the hotel, the ring tells him she is (page 73) human.

Distance well within the ring's capabilities? Consider that she is on the 89th floor, which has got to mean 900 feet up, if not more. She is a lot *more* than 300 feet away from him when the ring supposedly operates, probably about 1,000 feet.

As the reviewers would say, this should have been caught by the editor. Well, I haven't finished the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

story yet, so maybe there is an explanation later. Sadistic readers cannot wait to get the needle in.

And you must consider I am still dedicated to eternal hostility over the inconsistency between your magazine's title and its content.

"Blood Child" almost makes up for the lack of traditional SF. (I have never quite got over my affection for Venus Equilateral.) As the story went on, I could not believe the author was going where she was going. She was. And without copping out. Few stories hit me in the gut.

As I finished this one, one of our four cats jumped up on the bed (I put myself to sleep reading *IAsfm*) and there was an astonishing moment when I saw him as a human and us as aliens—or maybe vice-versa—but anyway with a rush of empathy for the situation our animals find themselves in as they try to relate to us and carry on as nearly normal lives as possible in a world run by our rules. Of course the analogy doesn't fit; it is highly doubtful our pets are that self-aware.

Oh, there is no doubt you are running very good writing. Sometimes I do appreciate it. But basically I started reading SF in 1939 (which of course meant *Astounding)* and my standards and expectations are still fixated there. Please, just don't start running that kind of "literary" stuff that is consciously intended to impress academics and reviewers. That's the sort of thing that killed mainstream fiction.

Authors were so anxious to demonstrate mastery of techniques that the story got lost.

Haven't read the rest of the issue yet. More angry criticism later.

Rinehart S. Potts
Glassboro, NJ

I wouldn't say "angry criticism" is meat and drink to us, but we don't mind. Shawna just hands all the letters to me without comment, but that's as it should be. I'm old and tough and rarely feel a wound more than forty years or so; while Shawna is young, tender, and beauteous.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor and Shawna,

I have just finished the June issue. I was excited when I read the names on the cover and was not disappointed. I read from cover to cover. Each story was good, even Viewpoint was understandable and easily read.

My favorite story was "Sun Smoke." It melted science, magic, computers, movie lore, a good knowledge of smog centers and Southern California thought into a good story.

The whole issue is one of the best I've seen in years, where each story was great with more than one jewel in the issue. I thoroughly enjoyed each page. Keep up the *excellent* work. When it comes time to renew in 1986, I gladly will.

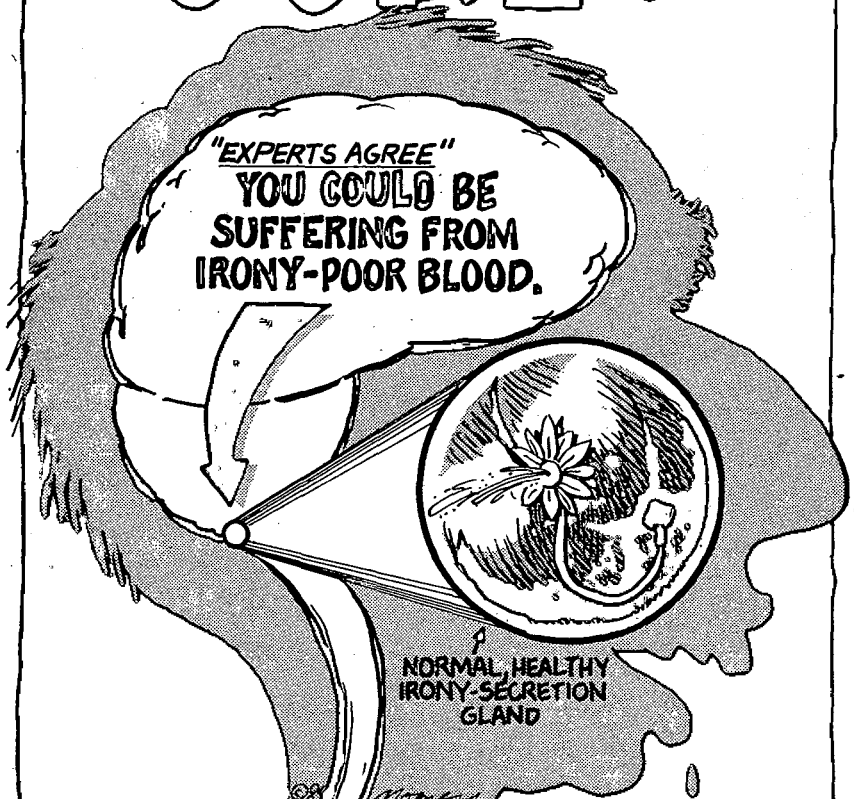
Frankie Wilcoxon
Fontana, CA

Don't forget your promise, because we won't. Come 1986, we want that renewal on our desk. And promptly.

—Isaac Asimov

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CAN'T TAKE A JOKE*?



* ¹joke \'jōk\ *n* [L *jocus*; akin to OHG *gehan* to say, Skt *jōcati* he implores] 1 a : something said or done to provoke laughter; *esp* : a brief oral narrative with a climactic humorous twist b (1) : the humorous or ridiculous element in something (2) : an instance of jesting : KIDDING <can't take a ~> c : PRACTICAL JOKE d : LAUGHINGSTOCK 2 a : something not to be taken seriously : a trifling matter <consider his skiing a ~ —Harold Callender> — often used in negative construction <it is no ~ to be lost in the desert> b : something presenting no difficulty <that exam was a ~> *syn* see JEST

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dear All,

Hey, what's going on?

In John Varley's *Press Enter* (May issue) and in James Killus' *Sunsmoke* (June issue) we have 1) a sentient computer, 2) a computer operator and programmer, dead, under mysterious circumstances related to (1), 3) an intelligent woman to assist in solving the problem, appearing rather abruptly, 4) Oriental influence, 5) Sex (not to be taken for granted in SF), 6) an epileptic seizure, or something very similar, induced by observing a candle-flame, and not unrelated to (1) and a general catastrophe which is fully understood by a small number, and barely believed by them (7).

At least you avoided putting them in the same issue! But, even in succeeding issues, that's a bit much! There should have been a six-month gap, at least. Each was a good enough story, in itself; but, coming so close together, the impact was neutralized, or even counter-acted. What *had* seemed rather original became déjà vu, or just cliché.

So, what gives? May we conclude that Varley and Killus had both just come from the same workshop, where one of the exercises was: Write a story with the following elements?

Or, were both stories written by a sentient computer, using different pen-names? Was the computer programmed by an Oriental, now deceased, who was interested in solving the problem of epilepsy, with the help of his intelligent girlfriend?

Or have we just witnessed the birth of a new sub-genre, with twins at the first birth?

It's a good magazine anyway. Carry on,

Edith S. Tyson
Knox, PA

Putting together a magazine is like putting together a jig-saw puzzle. Sometimes two stories that are vaguely similar can't be put very far apart, because the cavity filled by one of them simply can't be filled by any other story currently on hand. Please say you understand.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Shawna and Dr. Asimov,

I have wanted to write and express my views since I first subscribed a few years ago. The editorial in the February '84 issue finally stimulated me to do so.

To me, science fiction and fantasy are cousins. The division is often blurred. I enjoy both, and do not object to a few fantasy stories included in *IAsfm*. What I am more concerned with is the quality and type of individual story, rather than the classification.

I, like the Good Doctor, prefer "hard" science fiction. I originally subscribed to your magazine expecting that type of story, along with an occasional bit of variety—to expand my horizons. Unfortunately, I seem to have noticed a relative lack of "my kind" of stories. The January issue caused me to frequently check to see if I had the correct magazine. "Blued Moon" was the only story that held my interest. Since the others were in *IAsfm*, I suppose they were good SF, but barely.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Luckily, the February issue was much better. "The Rim Of The Wheel" was the worst story, and it—though not really SF—was enjoyable. I always find George and Azazel stories fun. "As Time Goes By" was another wonderful Ben Hardy takeoff on detective stories. Please, Mr. Salomon, don't stop yet. As always, Tom Rainbow's Viewpoint article was thought-provoking and instructive. I hope he has a few more planned.

I realize you can print only what you receive. So, any writers out there who were influenced by pulp-style, space opera, classic SF, please write a few old-fashioned "hard" stories for Dr. Asimov and me. Aren't there any writers who aren't graduates of two-bit, snooty, artsy creative writing courses? Writing is like cooking; a little spice adds interest, but too much just hides the flavor of the food. Some people enjoy over-seasoned food, but some of us prefer basic fare.

So many of the writers seem to be vying for the Bulwer-Lytton award. Their writing is all frosting and no cake. They seem to be trying to be "literary" and "sophisticated" to (over)compensate for SF's early reputation as second-rate fluff. It's like the fast food restaurants that are so busy overcoming the "junk food" label by adding pictures, plants, carpeting, etc. that they've forgotten to maintain the food quality. In a novel, one can afford to use whole paragraphs, or chapters, for involved descriptions or emotional musings. A short story doesn't allow that luxury; you only have a page or so to establish setting and story line. Otherwise you sacrifice the action, the heart of the story.

Good cooks use a little seasoning to accent their successes, poor cooks use a lot to disguise their failures.

OK, I realize someone must enjoy those stories. I'm willing to see a few every issue. But I really would like to see more "hard" stories, too. If only established writers have the ability or inclination to create such works, so be it. Perhaps that would even give new authors the courage to submit real SF stories.

Sincerely,

R. Jameson

Well, now, my notion of "hard science fiction" is not quite *what you call "pulp-style space opera." Fast moving adventure has its points, but as I recall the pulp SF adventures, good science was rarely one of their virtues.*

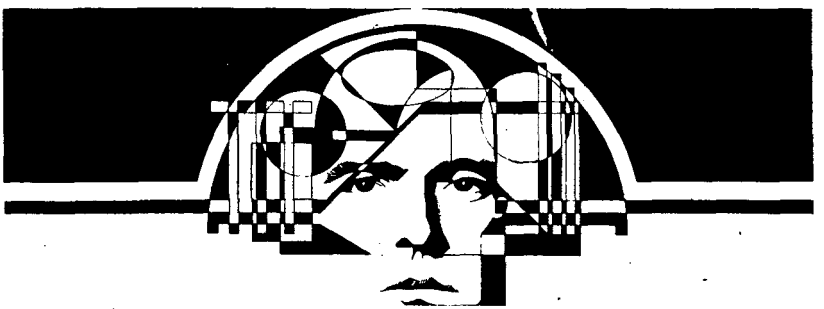
—Isaac Asimov

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *IAsfm* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the ZIP codes for both, please!) to our subscription department: Box 1933, Marion OH 43306.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MARTIN GARDNER

IT'S ALL DONE WITH MIRRORS



Mirrors have something monstrous about them.
—Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

After the spaceship *Bagel* left Barberpolia (see last November's column), Captain Larc Snaag ordered a shift to the Bagel's inertial hyperdrive. Several days went by uneventfully as the Bagel sped through the Milky Way Galaxy at almost the velocity of light. Suddenly the giant ship slammed into a totally unanticipated space warp created by a wandering black hole.

The ship's lighting system momentarily failed. Furniture and other objects were tossed about, crew members began to scream, and for several minutes the *Bagel* seemed to be tumbling like a child doing somersaults. A better metaphor: It was as if some monstrous creature had picked up the ship and flipped it the way one flips a coin. Then just as abruptly everything was calm, and the ship was moving smoothly on its original course.

Lieutenant Flarp, the officer on duty in the control room, reported at once to Captain Snaag.

"We don't know yet what happened," he said, his face still ashen, "but there has been some minor damage to the propulsion system. The engineering department tells me it will be difficult to make repairs while the ship is moving. They request a landing."

Snaag had just picked himself up from the floor, and was still feeling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

parts of his anatomy. No bones had been broken, though there were some painful bruises. "We'll land on the first suitable planet," he said. "I'll be along soon to take over the controls."

The *Bagel* was passing through an uncharted region of the galaxy, but by a stroke of good fortune, the radar screen spotted a planet only slightly larger than Earth. Careful analysis of the laser probes, by the ship's supercomputer VOZ, indicated no lifeforms on the planet. There also was no atmosphere, but because the repairs could be made from inside, this created no problem.

The *Bagel* made an easy landing. While the repairs were underway, Flarp washed his face and stuck a bandage over a small cut above his left eye. He was combing his hair in front of the mirror when suddenly a bizarre thought struck him.

"According to VOZ," he said to himself, "the *Bagel* flipped over several times when it plowed through five-dimensional spacetime. That means it must have rotated outside our three-space. Great Asimov! If we flipped over an odd number of times, then our ship and everything in it has been mirror reflected. That cut is really over my right eye, the way it looks in this mirror."

Flarp opened his medicine cabinet. The printing on the jars looked normal. "How idiotic of me," he thought, slapping his forehead on the unwounded side. "Of course the print would read the same even if we are reversed. My entire head, eyes and brain included, would have exchanged left and right sides. If the printing is reversed, it would still look normal."

Flarp frowned and massaged his cheek. "I must see what VOZ has to say."

VOZ listened attentively while Flarp asked him how many times the ship had turned over in four-space. "Sorry," he replied, "but I have no data. All the circuits blanked out, including mine, when we went through the warp."

"It must be possible, then," said Flarp, "that all of us are now mirror images of our former selves. If you took an asymmetric Flatlander out of his plane, turned him over an odd number of times in three-space, then returned him to his planiverse, he would be mirror reversed. It's the same. . . ."

"You don't have to explain," VOZ interrupted. "I understand perfectly. You forget that I'm programmed to visualize in higher dimensions. But don't worry. We're not reversed. We had a narrow escape, though. Someone should have consulted me before we landed for repairs."

How could VOZ be so certain that the *Bagel* had flipped over an even number of times? And why had he been so concerned about the landing? The answers are on page 133.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

A new publisher, Pacesetter, released several games earlier this year. One of them offers some interesting possibilities for people who enjoy science fiction role-playing games.

Time Master is subtitled "Adventures in the 4th Dimension" ($12.00 at your local store, or direct from Pacesetter Ltd., Box 451, Delavan, WI 53115). As its name implies, *Time Master* enables you to travel to any place and any time in the past, present, or future, even to other planets.

Game components include: one 64-page *Traveler's Manual* with rules and an outline of play; one 32-page *Guide to the Continuum* book with information on Earth in the year 7192 (where you start), and data on other eras in Earth's history; one 16-page introductory adventure called *Red Ace High,* which places you over the trench lines of the Western Front in World War I; one 20-by-27-inch full-color map to use with the introductory scenario; and 140 large 5/8-inch die-cut counters representing player characters, non-playing characters (NPCs) you may encounter, and weapons and vehicles. Three ten-sided dice are also included.

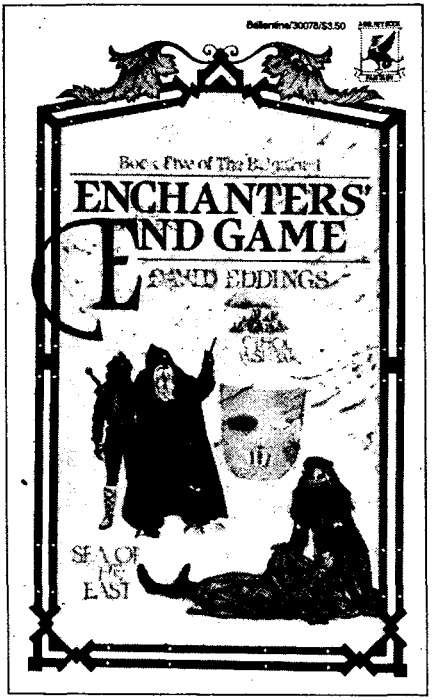
Before examining how the game is played, the quality of the game parts needs to be noted. This is a first-class game from a production standpoint. A good example are the dice—not just ordinary polyhedral types, but European-style with rounded edges and numbers pre-inked for easy reading. The rest of the game is of the same high standard: good art, lots of color, and an easy-to-read format. Even if you don't play role-games you'll enjoy reading through *Time Master* and its add-on modules.

Traveling through time causes many problems. Changing history—with the result of possibly altering the future (where you just came from!)—could create chaos.

After the first crude time-travel machines became available in 7051, the three major galactic powers started using them as weapons. The Time Wars, which began in 7054, were so devastating to everyone that a treaty was signed in 7154 that unified humans and aliens. Now the major concern is guarding the present by preventing renegades, mercenaries, and pirates (veterans from the Time Wars) from altering history when they seek personal gain in the past.

This is where you come in, as a recruit in the Time Corps. You're more than just a policeman, however. Because of the need for secrecy when working in the past or future, and of the required knowledge of history in order to set things right (should they deliberately or carelessly be altered by an outsider), you play the role of an agent/historian/soldier, depending on the situation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Book Five of *The Belgariad*

ENCHANTERS' END GAME

David Eddings

Cover illustration by Laurence Schwinger

The startling conclusion to the bestselling *Belgariad* series!

The quest was over. The Orb of Aldur was restored. And once again, with the crowning of Garion, a descendent of Riva Iron-grip ruled as Overlord of the West.

But the Prophecy was still unfulfilled. In the East, the evil God Torak was about to awaken and seek dominion. Somehow, Garion had to face the God—to kill or be killed. On the outcome of that dread duel rested the destiny of the world...

Now on sale $3.50

DEL REY

#1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy Published by Ballantine Books

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As a character in *Time Master,* you have eight dice-acquired attributes: strength; dexterity; agility; personality (charisma); willpower (mental fortitude); perception (ability at deduction, sensing traps, etc.); and luck. These are pretty straightforward design elements familiar to other role-playing games. In fact, if you already play other role-games you'll find *Time Master* easy to understand and play.

Also like other role-games, *Time Master* uses a referee (called a CM: Continuum Master) to direct play. The CM explains the situation presented in the scenario, controls the NPCs the players encounter, and generally guides the players along as they make decisions in the roles of their characters. While as few as two people can play the game (the CM and one person operating several characters), the ideal number recommended is one CM and three to six character-players.

An interesting feature of the *Time Master* design are the extensive rules for fighting major battles. Usually, role-games focus on just the small band of adventurers who are playing the game. *Time Master* adds the possibility of becoming part of a large battle—which may be necessary in order to correct history.

Many role-games have an evil force or mysterious enemy that the players are allied against. The "bad guys" in *Time Master* are the Demoreans—a power-mad alien race that will stoop to anything to change history in an attempt to destroy the now-peaceful galactic powers.

The Demoreans can assume the shape of humans or other aliens, and they are especially attracted to violence (battles give them a real "high"). They can only be detected because they are dedicated to perfection—a Demorean in human form has no scars or other normal skin imperfections.

The introductory adventure, *Red Ace High,* involves tracking down two Demorean agents who've taken control of Baron Manfred von Richtofen ("The Red Baron"). The Baron is going to use modern air-to-surface missiles to stop an American attack in 1917. Since an American colonel, George S. Patton of World War II fame, may be killed by the attack, it's imperative to stop the Demoreans and protect history.

Time Master is a well-presented game. Whether you're just looking for new ideas to incorporate into your current role-games, or want to try a fresh system, Pacesetter's new game is worth getting. ●

DANA LOMBARDY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

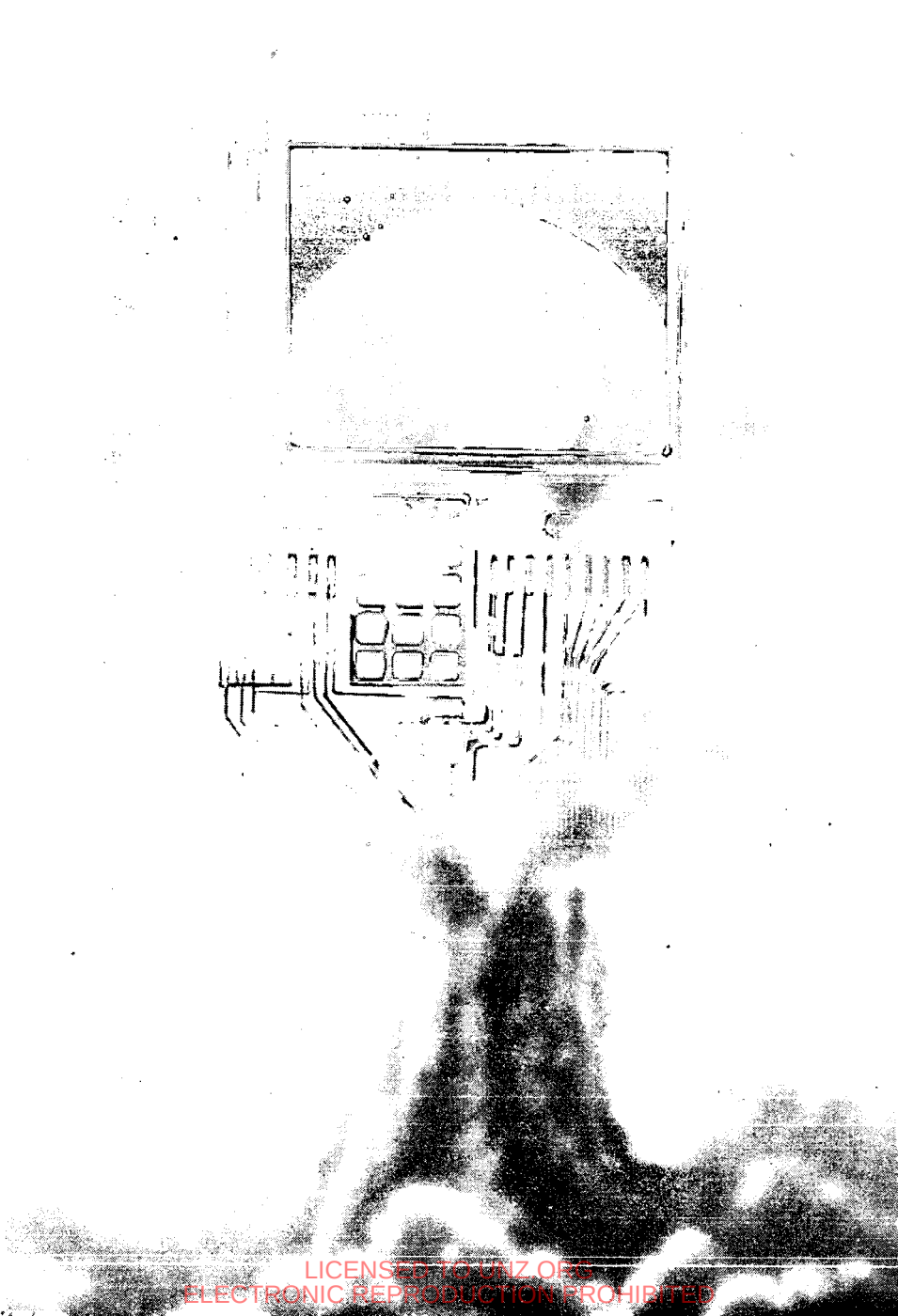
THE FIRST SPACEWOMAN

An Inquiry

Where were you when the news came?
Dining on the banks of the Dnieper?
Visiting a friend in the Urals
where space stands ice blue above and remote
as the events in Moscow?
Or training with the others,
cramped like a mollusk,
its shell glowing red and green with lights?
Did the Vostok keep you up,
turning awkwardly in your half-sleep
—a berg afloat in the Baltic?
Valentina Tereshkova, does it still
haunt your depths
when the gales howl at night?

—Robert Frazier

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

VIEWPOINT

DON'T WORRY, IT'S ONLY SCIENCE FICTION

The author of *Future Perfect: American Science Fiction of the 19th Century*, *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction*, and the forthcoming *The Nuclear War Book*, Bruce Franklin first got terrified by the subject of this article while serving as a navigator and intelligence officer in the Strategic Air Command.

art: Linda Burr

by H. Bruce Franklin

As President of the United States . . . I have to tell you, the people of the world, that as of eight o'clock Eastern Standard Time this morning the defense of the nation, and with it the defense of the free world, has been the responsibility of a machine. As the first citizen of my country, I have *delegated* my right to take my people to war."

With this announcement, the destiny of the world in D. F. Jones' 1966 novel *Colossus* is delivered to the circuits of the ultimate war-making computer—foolproof,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

invulnerable, and designed to annihilate the Soviet Union whenever its stupendous resources of logic and information have determined that an attack upon the United States has commenced or is imminent. But, alas, the U. S. planners have, as usual, fallen prey to what analysts today call "the fallacy of the last move," the belief that one side can "win" the arms race by deploying some new weapons system. Of course the Soviet Union matches the U. S. supercomputer Colossus with its own supercomputer Guardian. And now the two ultimate machines, jointly commanding the man-made means to exterminate the human race, link up to rule the world. Too late, the scientists who have designed and built our mechanical masters realize that, "Like the fools we are, we have created the bacteria, the bombs, the rockets, and all the rest of the paraphernalia, and surrendered the lot to these machines."

In *Colossus,* the inhuman dictatorship of the ultimate machine at least stops the arms race and forbids war, explaining, logically enough, that humans are better off living under its beneficent tyranny than "under the threat of self-obliteration." This of course is quite an optimistic ending compared to some other science-fiction visions of the culmination of the arms race.

Two masterpieces in this genre, Mordecai Roshwald's 1959 *Level 7* and Harlan Ellison's 1967 "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," make *Colossus* look like Heaven on Earth. Roshwald's novel ends with the extermination of the last human being, a far more pleasant fate than the ending of Ellison's story.

In *Level 7,* the quest for invulnerable retaliatory power finally transforms human beings into mindless automata, with numbers in place of names, buried deep in the earth, responding only to the commands of the master machine. When the machine gives the orders, people obey, push the buttons, and thus exterminate our species.

In Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," the war-making computers of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China coalesce into "Am," a single god-like consciousness which does as a whole just what it had been programmed to do in parts—with two additions. Instead of carrying out its orders

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to exterminate the human race dispassionately, Am has an emotion appropriate to its purpose: it infinitely *hates* its human creators. So Am saves five, chosen for inscrutable reasons, to torture forever, a damnation appropriate to the ultimate act of alienated human creation.

How far-fetched are these science-fiction scenarios? Of course only in science fiction have any computers attained self-consciousness. And only in science fiction has the human species been exterminated. But not all science fiction appears in the pages of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and other journals meant to entertain and enlighten us. In fact, our destiny is continually being written in the "scenarios" of those who plan our "defense." What are these "scenarios" if not another term for fictions set in hypothetical futures?

Department of Defense scenarios called for strategic bombers to make us more secure. But these bombers would take hours to reach their targets. To make us more secure, we would need intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of annihilating our enemy within thirty minutes. And on we went. Each advance in "defense" of course required more reliance on automation.

By 1970, we had deployed our first robot doomsday machine, known by the innocuous name of ERCS (Emergency Rocket Communications System). This primitive system is still operational.

For a decade, very few people outside an elite circle in the military knew about ERCS. Then in 1980, a small item buried in a 300-page procurement request submitted to Congress by the Air Force requested the piddling sum of $18.7 million for electronic replacement parts of the "Emergency Rocket Communications System, MN-16525C," needed because of "the aging of the system." This eventually led to the disclosure that eight of the Minutemen missiles ready for launch in Missouri silos contain, in place of warheads, robot transmitters programmed to send the current attack signal to the U. S. nuclear strike forces. On the command of an airborne Air Force command team, these missiles would launch and their robot transmitters would order the apocalypse.

But wouldn't the president still

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have to give the orders to the command team to activate ERCS? Isn't the president the only one with the authority to initiate thermonuclear war? Not while we're living under the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

Deterrence through MAD rests on each side's belief that if it attacks it will inevitably be hit with a devastating retaliation. If the president is the only one with authority to initiate a nuclear attack, the deterrent could be nullified by eliminating the president. The same logic applies to the vice president and his successors in authority. A single nuclear explosion, produced by a missile arriving in several minutes from an offshore submarine, or even a smuggled warhead detonated without any warning, could "decapitate" the entire existing command structure. In such an event, the decision to launch would have to be made by military officers under no control from any civilian authority or even from the top of the military command. Therefore, there can be no mechanical or electronic "fail-safe" system that would prevent launch by these military officers, for then the deterrent would cease to be credible and inevitable.

Indeed, to make retaliation even more certain, each individual nuclear-armed submarine now has both the physical means and the authority to launch its missiles if its officers believe there is evidence of a nuclear strike on the U.S. and if it does not receive orders not to launch. One of these submarines carries enough MIRV'd missiles to wipe out all the large cities of any nation on Earth.

Those old scenes of the U.S. president and the Soviet chairman negotiating on the Hot Line while missiles are in flight are as archaic as $35-an-ounce gold. More likely would be this absurd scene:

"Please wake up, Mr. President. NORAD has just informed us that dozens of Soviet missiles are heading toward the United States. One is due to impact on Washington in three minutes. What should we do?"

In any event, even if the president ever got to make a decision, he would be relying on information derived from computers and fed to him by the military, a blind box brilliantly projected in the 1983 movie *War*

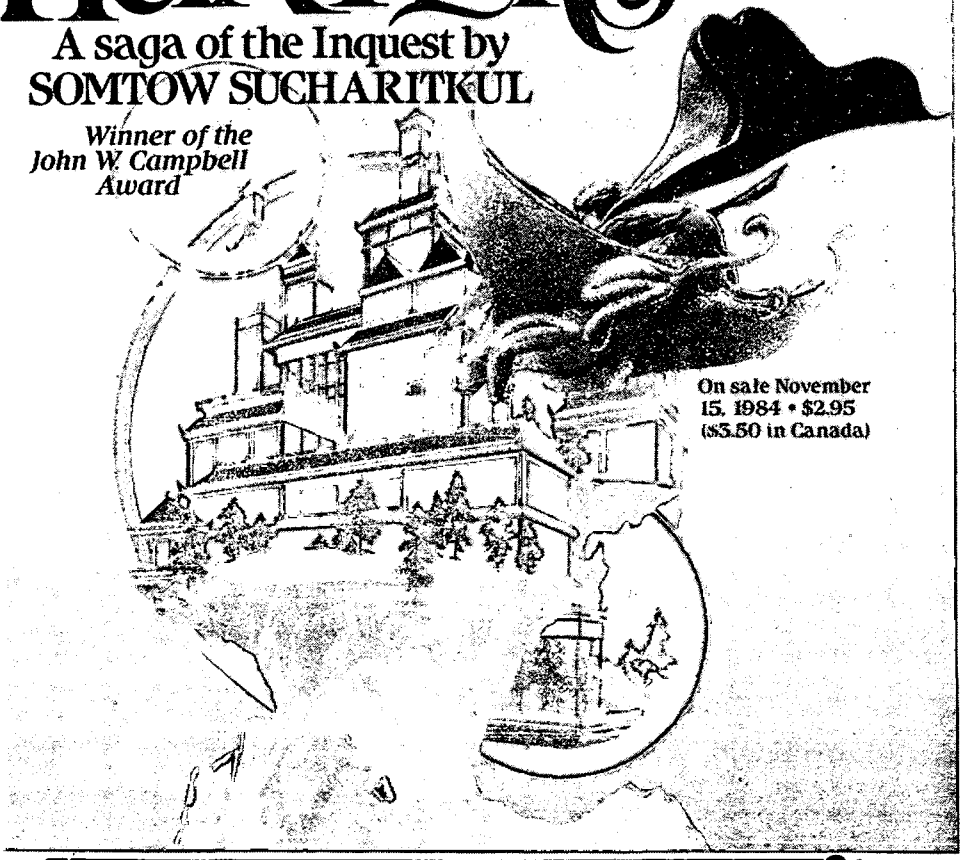
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Journey the Length and Breadth of a Universe...

UTOPIA HUNTERS

A saga of the Inquest by
SOMTOW SUCHARITKUL

Winner of the John W. Campbell Award



On sale November 15, 1984 • $2.95 ($3.50 in Canada)

SF&F Bantam Science Fiction and Fantasy:
The Best of All Possible Worlds.

BANTAM BOOKS, INC., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York 10103 • BANTAM BOOKS CANADA, INC., 60 St. Clair Avenue East, Suite 601, Toronto, Ontario M4T 1N5

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

VIEWPOINT

Games. But *War Games* did not imagine the worst cases, in which one side or both would be forced into launching merely because an attack seemed to be under way. Launch-on-warning means that computers would have to make the decision, in far less time than in *War Games*.

What if the president and the rest of Washington, or the Soviet chairman and the rest of Moscow, no longer exist? This is the question that the science-fiction scenarios of the "defense" planners try to answer in the era of six-minute "decapitation."

Prior to late 1983, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had yet been driven to adopt the policy of launch-on-warning. But then came the deployment of the Pershing IIs in West Germany. This placed these superaccurate mobile missiles, capable of annihilating cities or destroying hardened ICBM silos, within six to eight minutes of Moscow, and within four to ten minutes of much of the main Soviet deterrent, land-based ICBMs stationed in western Russia.

Imagine this scenario, no longer some far-fetched science fiction story. A Soviet satellite reports missile firings in West

"Not all science fiction appears in the pages of *IASFM* and other journals meant to entertain and enlighten us. In fact, our destiny is continually being written in the "scenarios" of those who plan our "defense." What are these "scenarios" if not another term for fictions set in hypothetical futures?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Germany. Some form of corroboration seems to come from either radar or eyewitnesses. By the time the Soviet command in Moscow receives the message, say thirty seconds have elapsed. Within three minutes, the appropriate authorities in the government have been located and informed—which assumes unlikely speed and efficiency. The Soviet leaders now have 150 seconds to decide whether to launch their ICBMs at the United States or risk having them destroyed in their silos ("use them or lose them"). But these liquid-fueled missiles cannot be launched, at the very speediest, in less than five minutes. It's too late for retaliation and the Soviet Union is doomed.

Perhaps this is what our government had in mind when it deployed the Pershing IIs. If so, it overlooked the entire history and logic of the arms race. Deployment of the Pershing IIs *forces* the Soviet Union to respond by adopting two policies, one just as dangerous as ours, the other infinitely more so.

If Pershing IIs are six minutes from Moscow, to retain a credible deterrent, Moscow must move its submarines six minutes from Washington. This in turn will sooner or later force Washington to adopt the other policy, which it is already forcing on Moscow: launch-on-warning.

Launch-on-warning, within a six-minute time frame, means that human beings must be taken out of the decision-making circuit. The destiny of the human species then depends each day on at least two (American and Soviet) autonomous systems of remote sensors, electronic communications, and the logic circuits of machines.

How secure does this make us? A few examples from recent history, more improbable than fiction, may help us answer that question.

On November 9, 1979, the main NORAD computer, located deep within a hollowed-out mountain in Cheyenne, Colorado, informed the U.S. defense command that a Soviet submarine in the north Pacific had just launched several missiles at the United States. Fortunately for the human species, this particular attack made no sense to human comprehension. Why should the Soviet Union attack with just a *few* missiles, launched from *one* submarine, off the U.S. *Pacific* coast? So jet fighters were

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

VIEWPOINT

scrambled, mainly from bases in Oregon and British Columbia, presumably to attempt verification through airborne radar. The military officers in charge determined, by means we do not know, that this was a false alarm. Later it was learned that the "problem" had been caused by a technician inadvertently feeding a training tape, simulating a Soviet attack, into the NORAD computer. The time taken to respond to the false alarm and make the crucial decisions was—six minutes.

What if no human beings had been involved in this decision making? Or what if this had happened after the Soviet Union had moved their submarines within six-minute attack time? Or what if the phantom missiles had not been heading for the relatively insignificant west coast but for Washington, thus threatening a decapitating first strike? Or if it had been a different training tape? Now imagine trying to program a computer to respond to all the various contingencies and possibilities of just this one set of circumstances.

Seven months later at 2:26 A.M., June 3, 1980, the NORAD computer showed that the Soviet Union had just launched a massive attack, with hundreds of ICBMs streaking in from sea and land. All nuclear submarines within radio communication were alerted, SAC headquarters in Omaha went on full alert and placed over a hundred armed B-52 and FB-111 bombers, engines running, in position for immediate launch, an emergency airborne command post was launched from Hawaii, and crews within the ICBM silos were instructed to insert their keys. Fortunately, there were still human beings involved in this decision making too. They had time to notice the mysterious—to human eyes—fact that the Soviet "missiles" were all coming in pairs.

Three days after this was written off as an unexplained false alarm, the same phenomenon reoccurred. Subsequent investigation revealed the culprit: a 46-cent chip that had shorted out, causing the transmission of a series of 2s that simulated paired incoming missiles.

These incidents, unlike the vast majority before and since, which remain entirely unknown to the public, caused a minor uproar. Officials admitted, according to the New York *Times* of June 6, 1980, that "the false alarm would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sharon Green introduces a memorable new super-heroine

Diana Santee woke to find herself stranded on a starcraft bound for nowhere. Then, beyond all known space, she was saved by an undiscovered star federation...that needed her for a desperate mission on a medieval world.

But Diana's space-agent training had not prepared her to become the unwanted mind-guest of a terrified virgin princess. Nor for betrayal into the dark clutches of a most primitive slavery.

MIND GUEST

DIANA SANTEE, SPACEWAYS AGENT: 1

By Sharon Green
author of the *Jalav* and *Terrilian* novels

A DAW SUPERSTAR
$2.95

The Exclusive Science Fiction and Fantasy Line Selected by DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

DAW SCIENCE FICTION

Distributed by NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not have been publicly disclosed except that hints had leaked to the press."

Senators Gary Hart and Barry Goldwater then chaired a Senate investigation of these and other incidents. Their report, released in October 1980, indicated that in an eighteen-month period between January 1979 and June 1980 there had been 147 "serious" false alarms (more than one every four days) and 3,703 "lesser" alarms (an average of almost seven a day).

Of course no sane person enjoys our present predicament, and no one who thinks seriously about the future can imagine it continuing indefinitely. Many hundreds of millions of people around the world have called for an end to the arms race and a movement toward a truly secure world.

Partly in response has come a counter movement, a major campaign in fact, spearheaded by certain science-fiction writers, to begin a vast new race for "defensive" armaments. General Daniel O. Graham, the main propagandist for "High Frontier," openly asserts (in his tract *We Must Defend America*) that "It constitutes an effective counter to the nuclear freeze movement."

Some of the oldest fantasies of modern science fiction—energy beams, defense "shields," automated battlefields, armed space cruisers and space mines, battle stations in space—are invoked with all the old "Wow! Gosh!" thrills of the dime novel and the early pulp magazines. Why should we live in perpetual insecurity, our president then asks, when we could dwell serenely under the protection of a super-technological defense?

This call to man—or rather to robot—the battle stations of space is the kind of juvenile fantasy that once gave science fiction a bad name. It would lead inevitably to a far more precarious situation, in which accidental nuclear war, or a first strike caused by involuntary mechanisms, would pass from possible to likely. The "Strategic Defense Initiative," the president's "Star Wars" program, is the path to a future that would in all senses be inhuman, for machines would determine whether it would be nonhuman.

After the United States and the Soviet Union went to the brink during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, both sides realized that the only path away from Armageddon led through negotiations to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mutually desirable goal of true security from our own weapons. A slow, arduous process traced a path leading us step by tiny step away from the brink. The Hot Line was set up. Nuclear testing was banned from our atmosphere, space, and under water. Nuclear-free zones were established: the sea-bed, the Moon, Latin America, space. Both powers joined with many others in an agreement to stop proliferation of nuclear weapons.

This prepared for the tough job—trying to stop and reverse the arms race. In 1964, the U. S. government called for a verifiable "freeze" (a position later denounced by the Reagan administration as a Soviet plot). Eventually agreement was reached on defining the respective forces, very difficult because of the asymmetrical character of these forces. Then, as a first step, two major Strategic Arms Limitations Treaties were agreed upon. The foundation of all the strategic arms accords was the ABM treaty, whereby each side pledged not to test or deploy more than a single system designed to defend a single geographical site against ballistic missiles.

What was the reasoning? Why

"Those old scenes of the U.S. president and the Soviet chairman negotiating on the Hot Line while missiles are in flight are as archaic as $35-an-ounce gold. More likely would be this absurd scene: 'Please wake up, Mr. President. NORAD has just informed us that dozens of Soviet missles are heading toward the United States. One is due to impact on Washington in three minutes. What should we do?' "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

VIEWPOINT

should a *defense* against missiles be considered by both sides to be the most threatening of all strategic systems?

The military strategists of both sides, able to agree on very few things, saw with clarity, even from their opposite positions, that any "defensive" weapons would be the greatest possible stimuli to the development of offensive forces, engendering an arms race to produce more and more offensive means to overwhelm the new defenses. For each new defensive weapon, the same cost and far less effort could produce many new types and quantities of offensive weapons. And these new offensive weapons would not wait until the deployment of the defenses; they would be produced and deployed while the defensive weapons were still in the development and testing stage. The testing and deployment of anti-missile defenses in today's world would nullify all existing agreements on strategic arms, make new ones impossible, and lead inevitably to an uncontrollable arms race ending with a global doomsday machine making its own decisions.

Especially ominous are the various schemes to militarize space. Since the first atomic bombs, each advance in the technology of strategic systems, ostensibly designed for "security," had made all of us less and less secure. Except for one—remote satellites operating in space. These are the "national technical means" that make arms agreements possible and enforceable; these are the monitors that both sides have agreed must be allowed to operate without interference; these occupy the only major demilitarized zone of human activities. So long as we know that satellites do not carry weapons, and so long as no nation has the capability to blind the space-borne eyes of any major nuclear power, we still have the opportunity to retain some control of human destiny. But remove these conditions, and we program our fate into our computers.

"High Frontier" proposes placing 432 battle stations, each armed with forty or fifty non-nuclear missiles, in orbit 300 miles above the Earth. In any crisis the full system would have to be, as even General Graham acknowledges, entirely independent of human decision making, and would fire *automatically* in response to any

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

missile launch from any other nation. He tells us that the United States would then merely inform "the Soviet Union—and others capable of space launches—that we could not, in light of the situation, consider any launch as peaceful." *(We Must Defend America,* p. 64)

Let's imagine some of the comforting forms of security this would provide.

Unless we fall into that "fallacy of the last move," we know that the Soviet Union would soon have an equivalent system. Do they then issue a similar ultimatum? What do the computers on either side do when they detect an apparent launch?

What if the leaders of China, seeing an opportunity to precipitate nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, launch missiles from submarines and/or explode by remote control space mines previously parked in orbit as neighbors of the battle stations. Of course, neither the orbiting computers nor computers on Earth could ascertain the nationality of either the subs or the space mines.

Suppose a meteoroid shower happens to demolish several battle stations. How do the computers interpret this and what do they determine to do?

Do these scenes sound far-fetched? Well, then, suppose one of those frequent "serious" false alarms we have already experienced happens to reoccur in an unanticipated form?

But don't worry about any of these scenarios. They're just science fiction. ●

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

All acclaim the new Heinlein as his best in years!

Stephen King—
"Following World War II Robert A. Heinlein emerged as not only America's premier writer of speculative fiction, but THE GREATEST WRITER OF SUCH FICTION IN THE WORLD. He remains today as a sort of trademark for all that is finest in American imaginative fiction."

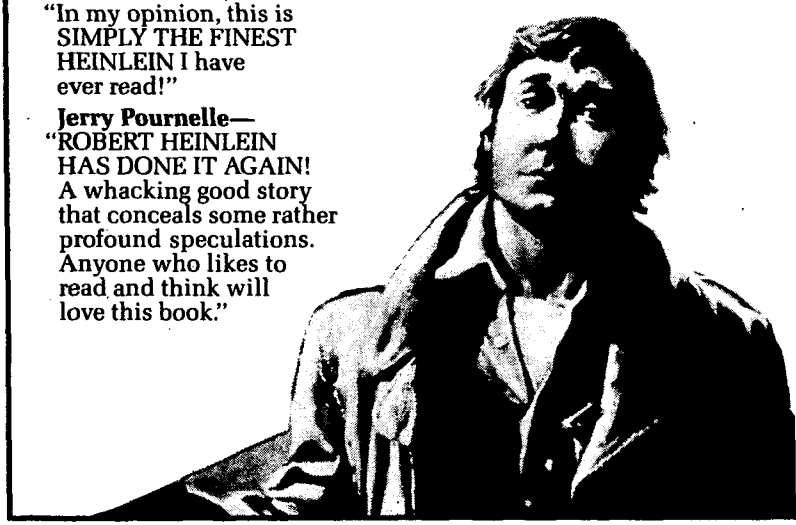
Isaac Asimov—
"Robert A. Heinlein has been THE LEADING WRITER OF FANTASTIC FICTION since 1939, and if you haven't figured out why, you will after reading JOB. It is funny, exciting and thought-provoking."

Arthur C. Clarke—
"And now Heinlein's done it again. As everyone knows I have a mutual non-aggression pact with all members of the Science Fiction Writers Association: I won't comment on their books as long as they won't comment on mine. It's a great pity, therefore, that I can't tell everyone that JOB IS THE BEST THING HE'S WRITTEN FOR YEARS."

Larry Niven—
"I couldn't put JOB down. It is a gripping novel, ONE OF THE BEST."

Robert Bloch—
"In my opinion, this is SIMPLY THE FINEST HEINLEIN I have ever read!"

Jerry Pournelle—
"ROBERT HEINLEIN HAS DONE IT AGAIN! A whacking good story that conceals some rather profound speculations. Anyone who likes to read and think will love this book."



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

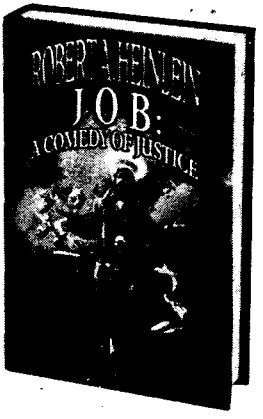
ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

J O B:

A COMEDY OF JUSTICE

An apocalyptic novel of the days before Armageddon, when once again God tests the faith of a man far beyond any persecution the original Job endured.

HEINLEIN AT HIS SUPERLATIVE BEST. A FASCINATING AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING NOVEL—ONE TO MAKE YOU SMILE, TO MAKE YOU WONDER, AND TO MAKE YOU CARE.



A Del Rey Hardcover
$16.95

DEL REY #1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy
Published by Ballantine Books

Cover illustration by Michael Whelan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

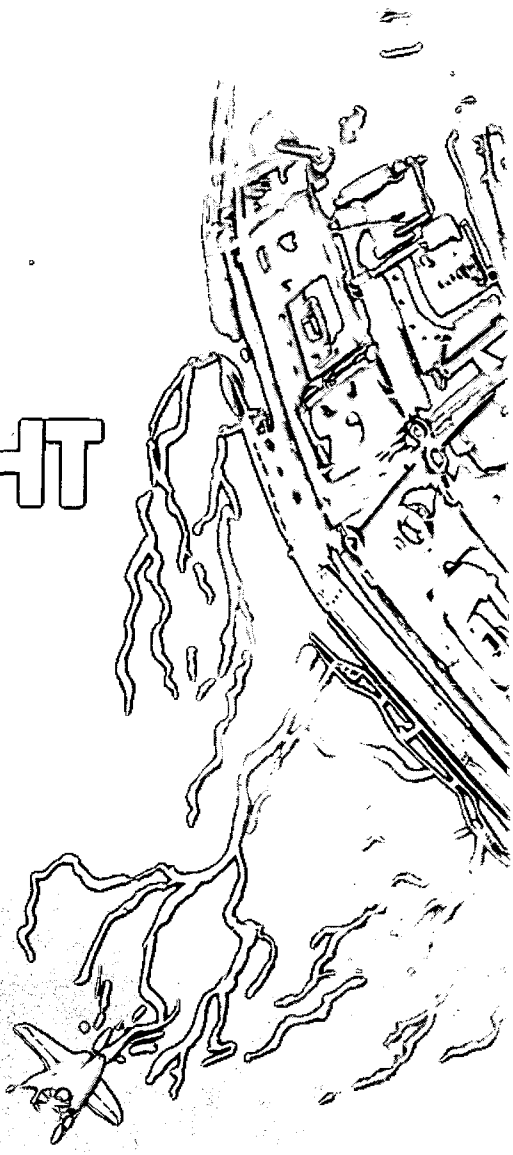
PILOTS OF THE TWILIGHT

by Edward Bryant

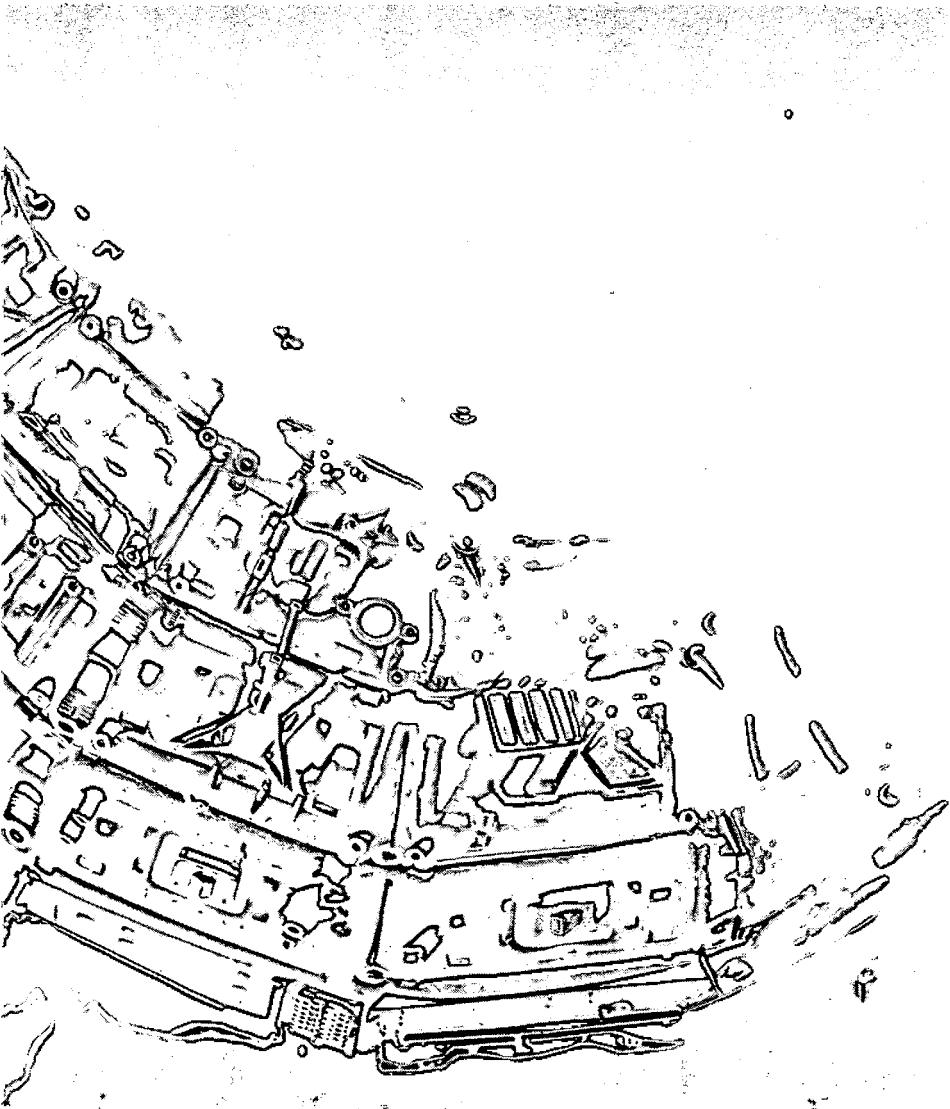
After sixteen years as a professional writer, with a hundred-odd stories, six books, and two produced films, the author says he is plotting a comeback. We think you'll find that this story, which will also appear as a section of Fred Saberhagen's *Berserker Base* (out soon from Tor Books), is a bit different from the dark fantasy he's been writing the last few years.

© 1984 by Edward Bryant

art: Val Lakey Lindahn



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Listen now.

This concerns a woman and a man, and a large, extremely hostile machine. It is a tale which has changed in some details over a generation, but is still true in its essentials. Some tellers have attempted to embroider the story, but nearly always have drawn back. They realized there simply was no need, and I concur.

The tale truly happened, and it took place just this way:

The woman's name was Morgan Kai-Anila. Some around her used the diminutive "Mudgie," though usually not more than once; not unless they were long-time friends or family. Morgan Kai-Anila was fast with a challenge, but even swifter with her customized dueling model of the neuro-humiliatron. People tended to watch their step around her.

Morgan was a remittance woman. Her home had been Oxmare, one of the jeweled estates setting off the green, cleared parklands to the south of the Victorian continent's capital. Now her home was wherever she found employment. The jobs had picked up as the political climate of our world, then called Almira, began to heat considerably. Morgan's partner was her ship, a sleek, deadly fighter called Runagate. Both singly and together, they had achieved a crucial style. They were known by everyone who counted.

The man's strong suit was not style. He was too young and too unmoneyed. The man possessed a baggage of names, a confusing matter not of his doing. The North Terrea villagers who finally had been convinced to accept custody of the boy back from the truculent 'Reen, had christened him Holt Calder. Only the smallest distant voice from the past in the adult Holt Calder's memory recalled his birth-parents' wish to name him Igasho. Then there were the 'Reen, who had mouthed the sequence of furry syllables translating roughly as "He-orphaned-and-helpless-whom-we-obliged-are-to-take-in-but-why-us?" Son of the largely unspoiled forests, "Holt" was what he eventually learned to respond to.

Holt's ship was not the newest or shiniest model of its class, but it had been modified by instinctual rural geniuses to specifications far superior to the original. The fighter's formal name was Limited North Terrea Community Venture Partnership One. Holt called his ship Bob.

Then there was the huge and hostile machine. It had no name as such, other than the digital coding sequence which differentiated it from all its brothers. It had no family roots, electronic or otherwise, located in this planetary system. Its style was as blunt and blocky as its physical configuration.

It was here only because a randomly ranging scout had registered sensor readings indicating the existence of sentient life—the enemy—and had transported those findings back to an authority that could evaluate them and take decisive action. The result was this massive killer popping out of nowhere, safely away from the system's gravity wells.

The scout's intelligence had been incomplete. There were, the new visitor discovered, two inhabited worlds in this system. Fine. No problem. Armaments were adequate to the increased task.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The machine swept with bulky grace along the plane of the ecliptic toward the nearer world, even though that planet was the enemy sanctuary whose orbit was closer to the central star. The machine's only reason to opt for that jungle world first was mere convenience. It was a target of opportunity. If any complications arose, the assassin's implacable brain could compute new strategy.

A sympathetic human might have considered this a good day for killing. It didn't occur to the machine that it was having a good day. Nor was it having a bad day. It was just having a day.

A small part of the machine's brain checked and confirmed the readiness of its weapons. Its unfailing logic knew the precise time it would reach striking distance. Electrons spun remorselessly, just as the two inhabited planets ahead rotated on their axes. Maybe the machine *was* having a good day . . .

Morgan Kai-Anila's day was going fine. Runagate screamed down through the airless space around the moon Fear. Occasional defensive particle beams glittered and sparked as they vaporized bits of debris still descending slowly from Morgan's last strafing run. The missiles to the defense dome housing the Zaharan computers had done their work well, confusing if not destroying the targets.

"Eat coherent light, Zaharan scum," Morgan muttered, punching the firing stud for the lasers. Her heart really wasn't in it. Some of her best friends were Zaharans. This was only a job.

The lasers flashed away from recessed ports to Runagate's prow with a vibrating, high-pitched *thrumm*. Morgan saw the main Zaharan dome slice open and rupture outward from the pressure differential, spilling dozens of flailing, vac-suited figures into the harsh sunlight on Fear's surface.

"Ha!" Morgan kicked in the auxiliaries and hard-banked Runagate into a victory roll as the ship knifed away from the devastation. The pilot's ears registered the distant rumble of the dome explosion. She hoped the tumbling, suited figures all were watching. Good run.

Runagate climbed quickly away from the rugged, cratered surface of the moon. Within a few seconds, the distance allowed Morgan to see the full diameter of the irregular globe that was Fear.

"Good job, Mudge," said Runagate. The ship was allowed to use variations of Morgan's loathed childhood name. But then, she had programmed Runagate.

"Thanks." Morgan leaned back in the padded pilot's couch and sighed. "I hope nobody got torn up down there."

Runagate made the sound Morgan had learned to interpret as an electronic shrug. "Remember that it's just a job. You know that. So do they. Everybody loves the risks and the bonuses or they wouldn't do it."

Morgan touched the controls on the sound and motion simulation panel; the full-throated roar of Runagate slashing through open space died away. The ship now slid silently through the vacuum. "I just hope the raid did some good."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You *always* say that," Runagate pointed out. "The raid on Fear was a small domino, but an important one. The Zaharans' bombardment base won't be dumping anything dangerous on Catherine for a while. That will give the Catherinians enough time to build up their defensive systems, so that Victoria can take some of the pressure off the Cytherans before Cleveland II and the United Provinces—"

"Enough," said Morgan. "I'm glad you can keep track of continental alliances. I'm suitably impressed. But will you just prompt me from time to time, and avoid the rote?"

"Of course," Runagate said, the synthesized voice sounding a touch sulky.

Morgan swiveled to face the master screen. "Give me a visual plot for our touchdown at Wolverton, please." The ship complied. "Do you estimate I'll have time for a workout before we hit atmosphere? I'm stiff as a plank."

"If you are quick about it," said Runagate.

"And what about my hair?" Morgan undid the rest of her coif. It had started to come undone during the raid on Fear. Red curls tumbled down onto her shoulders.

"It's one or the other," the ship said. "I cannot do your hair while you are working out."

"Oh, all right," Morgan said mournfully. "I'll take the hair."

The ship's voice said, "Did you have plans for tonight?"

Morgan smiled at the console. "I'm going out."

A bunch of spacers were whooping it up at the Malachite Saloon as they were wont to do any evening when a substantial number had returned safely from freelance missions. It had been a lucky day for most, and now was going to be a good night. The swinging copper portals might as well have been revolving doors. The capering holograms on the windowed upper deck had tonight been combined with live dancers. The effect of the real and unreal forms blurring and merging and separating composed an unnerving but fascinating spectacle outside for the occasional non-spacer passersby.

"Look, Mommy!" said one tourist urchin, pointing urgently at the dance level as a finned holo enveloped a dancer. "A shrake ate that man!"

His mother grabbed a hand of each of her two children and tugged them on. "Overpaid low-life," she said. "Pay no heed."

The older brother looked scornfully at his sibling. "Oneirataxia," he said.

"I do *so* know what reality is," said the younger boy.

Inside the Malachite Saloon, Holt Calder sat alone in the fluxing crowd. He was a reasonably alert and pleasant-looking young man, but he was also the new boy on the block, and spacer bonds took time to form. Holt had fought only a comparative handful of actions, and had truly seen nothing particularly exciting until today.

"Let me tell you, son, you almost cashed it in this afternoon off Loath-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE WAR OF THE FUTURE

Like the wars of today, it will be won not by push-button politicians or pins on a map, but by the soldiers of tomorrow, fearless fighting men of intergalactic space. Here are the men of war who give their life's blood that we may live free.

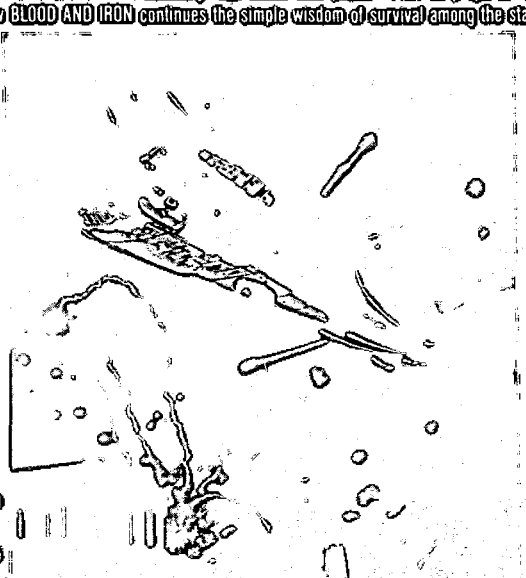
CREATED BY

J.E. POURNELLE

BLOOD AND IRON

THERE WILL BE WAR VOLUME III

THERE WILL BE WAR was the Warning: If you want to live, you must be willing to die. MEN OF WAR sounded the Battlecry: You would have peace? Then be prepared for war. Now BLOOD AND IRON continues the simple wisdom of survival among the stars.



Coming in December from Tor Books
384 pages • $2.95

TOR BOOKS
WE'RE PART OF THE FUTURE

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing." The grizzled woman in black leathers raised her voice to penetrate the throbbing music from upstairs. Her hair was styled in a silver wedge and she wore a patch over her left eye. Without invitation, she pulled up a chair and sat down.

Holt put down the nearly empty glass and stared at her. True, he had realized at the time that it was not a particularly intelligent move to speed out of the moon Terror's shadow and pounce on a brace of more heavily armed Provincial raiders. "I didn't really think about it," he said seriously.

"I suspected as much." The woman shook her head. "Damned lucky for you the Cytherans jumped us before I had a chance to lock you in my sights."

"You?" said Holt. "Me? How did you know—"

"I asked," the woman said. "I checked the registry of your ship. Tonight I made a point of coming to this smoke-hole. I figured I ought to hurry if I wanted to see you while you were still alive."

The young man drained his glass. "Sorry about your partner."

The woman looked displeased. "He was about your age and experience. I thought I had him on track. Idiot had to go and get over-eager. Lucky for you."

Holt felt uncertain about what to do or say next.

The woman thrust out her hand. "The name's Tanzin," she said. "I trust you've heard of me—" Holt nodded. "—but nothing good."

Holt felt it unnecessary and indeed, less than politic, to mention that Tanzin was usually spoken of by other free-lancers in the vocabulary that was also used to name the three moons, especially Fear and Terror. Her grip was strong and warm, quite controlled.

"Couldn't help but notice," said Tanzin, "that you've been slugging them down fairly frequently." She gestured at his empty glass. "Buy you another?"

Holt shrugged. "Thanks. I never drank much. Before tonight. I guess the close call got to me."

"You don't have a mission tomorrow, do you?"

The young man shook his head slowly.

"Fine. Then drink tonight."

There was a commotion at the other end of the long, rectangular room. Holt tried to focus through the smoky amber light as a perceptible ripple of reaction ran through the crowd. Public attention had obviously centered on a woman who had just entered the Malachite. Holt couldn't make out much about her from a distance, other than her height, which was considerable, and her hair, which fell long and glowed like coals.

"Who is that?" said Holt.

Tanzin, trying to signal a server, glanced. "The Princess Elect."

Holt's mouth opened as the Princess Elect and a quartet of presumed retainers in livery neared and swept past. "She's beautiful."

"The slut," said a deep voice from behind him. "Out slumming."

"Her hair . . ." Holt closed his mouth, swallowed, then opened it again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE SAGA OF THE
GREATEST HERO CONTINUES

CHAMPIONS OF THE SIDHE

The bold and daring fantasy adventure of Lugh of the Long Arm by the author of THE RIDERS OF THE SIDHE

KENNETH C. FLINT

On sale November 15, 1984 • $2.95

SF&F **Bantam Science Fiction and Fantasy: The Best of All Possible Worlds.**

BANTAM BOOKS, INC., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York 10103 • BANTAM BOOKS CANADA, INC., 60 St. Clair Avenue East, Suite 601, Toronto, Ontario M4T 1N5

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's red. So?" That and a chuckle came from a new speaker, a cowled figure sitting at a small table close by Holt's right in the packed bar.

"You *must* have been out on a long patrol," said Tanzin.

"Hey, *I* like red too," said the same booming voice from behind Holt. He turned and saw two men, each dark-bearded, both dwarfing the chairs in which they sat.

The one hitherto silent turned to his companion. "So why don't you ask her to dance, then?"

The louder one guffawed. "I'd sooner dance with a 'Reen."

Before he realized what he was doing, Holt had jumped to his feet and turned to confront the two men. "Take it back," he said evenly. "I won't have you be insulting."

"The Princess Elect?" said the first man in apparent astonishment.

"The 'Reen."

"Are you crazy?" said Tanzin, reaching up and grabbing one elbow.

"Perhaps suicidal," murmured the hooded figure, taking his other elbow. "Sit back down, boy."

"Don't spoil my fun," said the louder of the large men to the pair restraining Holt. "I'd fly all the way to Kirsi and back without a map, just so's I could pound a 'Reen-lover."

"Big talk," said Tanzin. "You do know who I am?"

The man and his partner both looked at her speculatively. "I think I can take you too," said the first.

"How about me?" With the free hand, the cowled figure threw back her hood. Red curls smoldered in the bar light.

The first big man smirked. "I think I can mop, wax, and buff the floor, using the three of you."

The second large man cautioned him. "Hold on, Amaranth. The small one—that's what's-her-name, uh, the Kai-Anila woman."

Amaranth looked pensive. "Oh, yeah. . . . The hot-shot on the circuit. You got as many confirmeds during the Malina Glacier action as I did all last year combined. Shoot, I don't want to take you apart."

"There's an easy way not to," Tanzin said. "Let's all just settle back. Next round's on me."

Amaranth looked indecisive. His friend slowly sat down and tugged at the larger man's elbow. "How about it, Amaranth? Let's go ahead and have a drink with the rookie and these two deadly vets."

Morgan and Tanzin sat. Still standing, Holt said, "Amaranth. What kind of name is that?"

Amaranth shrugged, a motion like giant forest trees bending slightly as wind poured off the tundra. "It's a translation. Undying flower. My pop, he figured we'd get to emigrate to Kirsi and he ought to name me that as a portent. My mom thought it sounded wrong with my last name, so she politicked for Amaranth—it means the same but doesn't alliterate—and it stuck."

"Good name," Holt said. He introduced himself and put out his hand. Amaranth shook it gravely. The other introductions followed. Amar-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anth's friend was Bogdan Chmelnyckyj. A server appeared and drinks were ordered.

Holt couldn't help but stare then, when he first looked closely at Morgan.

"The hair really is red." She smiled at him. "Even redder than the Princess Elect's."

Holt shut his mouth and then said, "Uh." He knew he was making a fool out of himself, but there didn't seem to be any help for it. He realized his heart was beating faster. This is ridiculous, he told himself, feeling more than comfortably warm. He could smell her and he liked it. We're all professionals, he admonished himself. Cut out the hormonal dancing.

It didn't do any good. He still stared and stammered and hoped that drool wasn't running off his chin.

The other four seemed oblivious to Holt's situation and were talking shop.

"—something's up," Amaranth was saying, as Holt tried to focus on the words. "I got that from the debriefer after I set down at Wolverton. Wasn't that long ago tonight. I hit up four or five grounders for information, but nobody'd divulge a thing."

"I have the same feeling," Tanzin said. She looked thoughtful. "I called a friend of mine over at the Office of the Elect. Basically, she said 'Yes,' and 'I can't tell you anything,' and 'Keep patience—something'll be announced, perhaps as soon as tonight.' I'm still waiting." She drained a shot of 2-4-McGilvray's effortlessly.

"Maybe not much longer." Bogdan motioned slightly. The five of them looked down the bar. The Princess Elect had returned from wherever her earlier errand had taken her and now stood talking to one of the Malachite's managers. Then she snapped her fingers and two of the huskier members of her entourage lifted her to the top of the hardwood bar.

For a moment she stood there silently. Her clingy green outfit shone even in the dim light. The Princess Elect tapped one booted foot on the bar. A ripple of silence spread out until only murmurs could be heard. The music from upstairs had already cut off.

"Your world needs you," said the Princess Elect. "I will be blunt. Effective now, the normal political wranglings among Victoria, Catherine, Cythera, and all the rest have ceased. The reason for this is simple—and deadly." She paused for maximum drama.

Amaranth raised a shaggy eyebrow. "Our star's going to go nova," he speculated.

"There is an enemy in our solar system," continued the Princess Elect. "We know little about its nature. Something we can be sure of, though, is that effective local sundown tonight, our colonists on Kirsi found themselves in a state of siege."

The level of volume of incredulous voices all around the room rose and the Princess Elect spread her hands, her features grave. "You all know that the few colonists on Kirsi possess only minimal armament. Apparently the satellite station was overwhelmed immediately. At this mo-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment, the enemy orbits Kirsi, turning the jungles into flame and swamps into live steam. I have no way of ascertaining how many colonists still survive in hiding."

"Who is it?" someone cried out. "Who is the enemy?" The hubbub rose until no one could be heard by a neighbor.

The Princess Elect stamped her foot until order could be restored. "Who is the enemy? I—I don't know." For the first time, her composure seemed to crack just a little. Then it hardened again. Holt had heard the Princess Elect was a tough cookie, in every way a professional, just as he was as a pilot. "I have ordered up a task force to proceed to Kirsi and engage the enemy. All pilots are to be volunteers. All guilds and governments have agreed to cooperate. I wish I had more information to tell you tonight, but I don't."

Again Holt thought the Princess Elect looked suddenly vulnerable before the shocked scrutiny of the Malachite crowd. Her shoulders started to slump a bit. Then she gathered herself and the steel was back. "Personnel from the Ministry of Politics will be waiting to brief you back at the port. I wish you all, each and every one, a safe and successful enterprise. I want you all to return safely, after saving the lives of as many of our neighbors on Kirsi as is humanly possible." She inclined her head briefly, then leaped lithely to the floor.

"Hey! Just hold on," someone yelled out. Holt could see only the top of the Princess Elect's head. She paused. "What about bonuses?"

"Yeah." Someone else joined in. "You want us to put our tails on the line, making an inter-planet jump and fighting a whatever-it-is—a boojum—all for regular pay and greater glory?"

"How about it?" a third pilot shouted over the rising clamor.

Holt could tell just from the attitude of the top of the Princess Elect's head that she wasn't pleased. She raised one gloved hand and the decibel level lowered. "Bonuses, yes," she said. "Quintuple fees. And that also goes for your insurance to your kin if you don't come back."

"Bork that," said Amaranth firmly. "*I'm* coming back."

"Does 'quintuple' mean 'suicide'?" said Bogdan slowly. He shrugged.

"Satisfactory?" said the Princess Elect. "Good fortune to all of you then, and watch your tails." Within seconds, the entourage had whisked her away.

The crowd was quieter than Holt would have expected.

"Hell of a damper on the party," Tanzin said.

"I am ready," said Amaranth. "Could have used some sleep, but—" He spread his hands eloquently.

Bogdan nodded. "I, as well."

"We may as well start back," said Tanzin. "I expect all transport will be headed toward the field."

Morgan flipped her hood forward. Holt was saddened to see her beauty abruptly hidden. "Some kind of fun now," she said in a low voice.

"I hope . . ." he said. They all looked at him. Holt felt like a child among a group of adults. He said simply, "Nothing. Let's go."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Midnight in the jungle. Nocturnal creatures shrilled and honked on every side. Overhead the star field shimmered and winked, as a brighter star crawled slowly across the zenith.

Kirsi's moon Alnaba began to edge over the tree-canopied horizon to the east.

Then the night sounds stopped.

The image suddenly tilted and washed out in a flare of silent, brilliant white light.

"That was the ground station at Lazy Faire."

Black. Stars that didn't twinkle.

Something moved.

The image flickered, blurred, then focused in on—something.

"What's the scale?"

"About a kilometer across. At this point, we can't be more exact."

It was a polyhedron that at first one might mistake for a sphere. Then an observer perceived the myriad angles and facets. As the image clarified, angular projections could be seen.

The device reflected little light. In its darkness it seemed a personification of something sinister. Implacable machinery, it looked tough and mean enough to eat worlds.

"We managed to swing the cameras of a surface resources surveyor. These were all the pictures we got."

A spark detached from the distant machine. That spark grew larger, closer, until it filled the entire screen. As with the transmission from Kirsi's surface, the image then flared out.

"That was it for the survey satellite. I think you've gotten a pretty good idea of the fate of nearly everything on and around Kirsi."

The lights came up and Holt blinked.

"It's gonna be one hell of a job, let me tell you that now," Amaranth said to him.

"I think my enthusiasm is wearing thin already." Tanzin looked glum.

"Beams," said Bogdan. "More wattage than this whole continent. Missiles up the rear. How're we gonna tackle that thing?"

Morgan smiled faintly. "I'd say our work's cut out for us."

"Bravado?" Tanzin covered the younger woman's hand with her own. The five of them sat behind a briefing table in the auditorium. "I agree with the sentiment. I just question how we're going to implement it." Complaining voices, questioning tones spiraled up from the other dozens of tables and scores of seated pilots around the room.

"I know what you're all asking. I'll try to suggest some answers." Dr. Epsleigh was the speaker. She was short, dark, intense, the coordinator chosen by the emergency coalition of governments to set up the task force. She was known for the sharpness of her tongue—and an ingenious ability to synthesize solutions out of unapparent patterns.

Someone from the back of the hall shouted, "Your first answer ought to try to squelch all the rumors. Just what *is* that thing?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Introducing A Major New Science Fiction Series:

TALES OF THE VELVET COMET

By MIKE RESNICK

"A goodie...Buy it, and join me in wondering what Mike will do in the next volumes in the series."—*Analog*

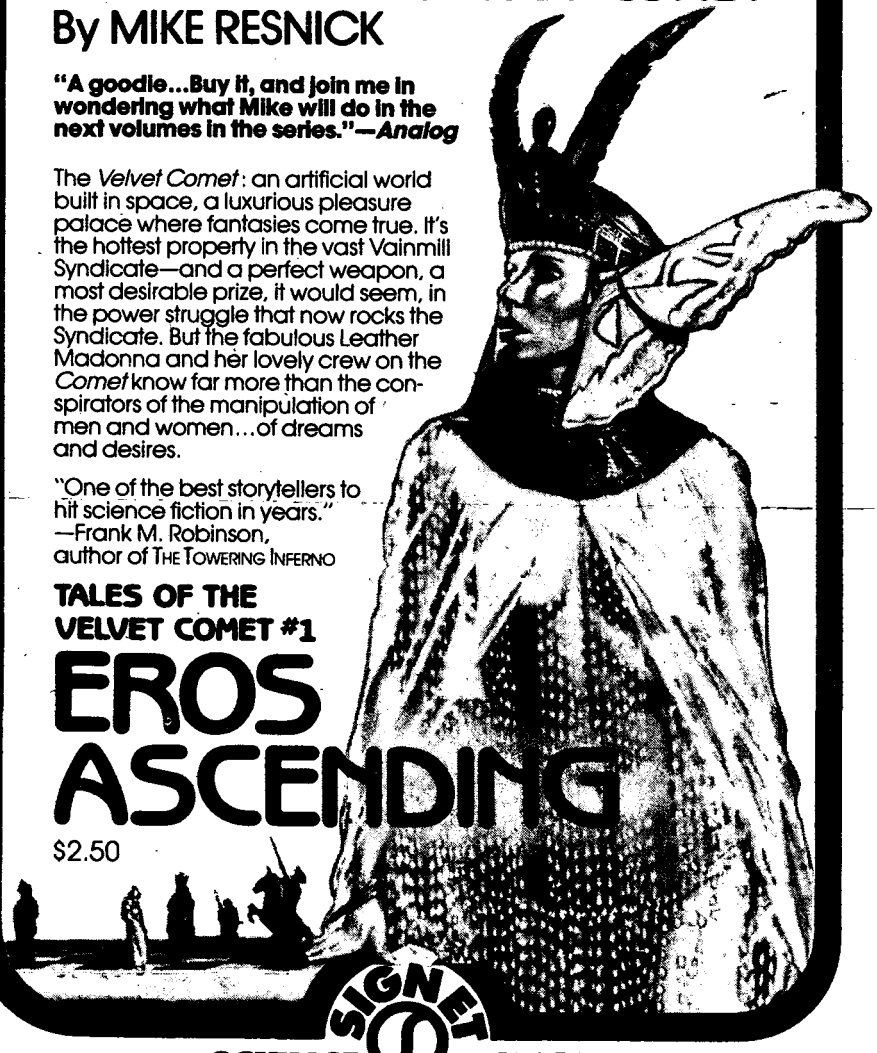
The *Velvet Comet*: an artificial world built in space, a luxurious pleasure palace where fantasies come true. It's the hottest property in the vast Vainmill Syndicate—and a perfect weapon, a most desirable prize, it would seem, in the power struggle that now rocks the Syndicate. But the fabulous Leather Madonna and her lovely crew on the *Comet* know far more than the conspirators of the manipulation of men and women...of dreams and desires.

"One of the best storytellers to hit science fiction in years."
—Frank M. Robinson,
author of THE TOWERING INFERNO

TALES OF THE VELVET COMET #1

EROS ASCENDING

$2.50



SIGNET SCIENCE FICTION

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I heard," said Dr. Epsleigh, "that someone earlier in the evening called our opponent a boojum." She smiled grimly. "That was an astute nomenclature."

"Huh?" said the questioner. "What's a boojum?"

"It's fortunate that classical literacy is not a requirement of a first-rate fighter." Dr. Epsleigh snorted. "The long-range sensors detected an object and coded it as a snark, a possible cometary object. One of our programmer ancestors liked literary allusions . . ."

At the table, Morgan's head jerked and she half-raised one hand toward an ear.

"What's wrong?" said Holt, feeling a start of concern.

"Runagate," she answered. "The ship's link. I've got to turn down the volume. Runagate just shouted in my ear that *he* knows all about snarks and boojums. Quote: 'For the snark *was* a boojum, you see.' "

"So just what is—" he started to say.

Dr. Epsleigh's amplified voice overrode him. "What we shall be fighting, as best can be determined at this time, is an automated destroyer, a deadly relic from an ancient war. It's a sentient machine that has been programmed to terminate all the organic life it encounters."

"So what's it got against us?"

"*That's* a dumb question," someone else pointed out. "Maybe you're not organic intelligence, Boz." The first questioner flushed pink.

"Thank you," said Dr. Epsleigh. "We've been running an historical search for information in the computers. Objects like that machine orbiting Kirsi were known when we sought refuge in this planetary system four centuries ago. They were just part of the oppressive civilization our ancestors fled. Our people wanted to be left alone to their own devices. It was assumed that the vastness of the galaxy would protect them from discovery by either the machines or the rest of humanity." Dr. Epsleigh paused. "Obviously the machines were better trackers—or perhaps this is just a chance encounter. We don't know."

"Is there room for negotiation?" That was Tanzin.

Dr. Epsleigh's humorless smile appeared again. "Apparently not. In the past, the machines negotiated only when it was part of a larger strategy against their human targets. The attack on Kirsi was without warning. The machine has not attempted to communicate with any human in the system. Nor has it responded to our overtures. It is merely pounding away at Kirsi with single-minded ferocity. We think it picked that world simply because Kirsi was closer to its entrance point into this system." Dr. Epsleigh's jaw visibly tightened; the tension reflected in her voice. "It's not merely trying to defeat our neighbors. The machine is annihilating them. We're witness to a massacre."

"And we're next?" said Morgan.

"All of Almira," said Dr. Epsleigh. "That's what we anticipate, yes."

"So what's the plan?" Amaranth's voice boomed out.

Holt glanced aside at Morgan, her hair almost glowing in the hall's artificial glare. His job had been to send back fee dividends to North

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Terrea, the village that had invested in him and his ship. Until only a short time ago, his life had centered around adventure, peril, and profit. Now a new factor had intervened. It seemed there suddenly was another facet of life to consider. Morgan. Maybe it *was* only a crush—he'd never find out if it would work or not. He wanted to explore the possibilities. Instead they'd both fly out with the rest to Kirsi. The machine would kill him. Or her. Or the both of them. It was depressing.

Dr. Epsleigh interrupted his reverie. "We don't know what the defensive capabilities of the machine are. The few ships that investigated from Kirsi didn't even get close enough to test its screens. You'll be more careful. We think you've got considerably more speed and mobility than the machine. The strategy will be to slip a few fighters through the machine's protective screens while the other ships are skirmishing. We're jury-rigging some heavier weapons than standard issue."

"Um," said a pilot off to the left. "What you're saying is, you *hope* some of us can find points of vulnerability on that critter?"

"We're continuing to gather intelligence about the machine," said Dr. Epsleigh. "If a miracle answer comes up, believe me, you'll be the first to know."

"It's borking suicide." Amaranth's voice carried throughout the hall.

"Probably." Dr. Epsleigh's smile heated from grim to wry. "But it's the only borking chance we've got."

"Why even *bother* with quintuple bonuses," someone muttered. "No one'll be around to spend 'em other than the machine."

"How can that boojum-thing just want to wipe us all out?" came an overly loud musing from the back of the room.

"Aren't you forgetting us and the 'Reen?" Holt said angrily, also loud. His neighbors stared at him.

"We didn't kill 'em all," said Bogdan mildly.

"Might as well have. For four hundred years, we took their land whenever it suited us. They died when they got in our way."

"Not in *my* way," protested Bogdan. "I've never done anything to those stinking badgers."

"Nor *for* them," said Holt.

"Shut up," said Tanzin. "Squabble later. When the machine bombards Almira, I'm sure it won't distinguish between human and 'Reen." She raised her voice back in the direction of Dr. Epsleigh. "So what happens next?"

"We're outfitting the fighters. It will take some hours. You'll be leaving in successive waves. The ready rooms are prepared. I suggest you all get whatever sleep or food or other relaxation you can manage. I'll post specific departure rosters when I can. Questions?"

There were questions, but nothing startling. Holt drew his courage together and turned toward Morgan. "Buy you a caf?" She nodded.

"Buy us all a caf," said Tanzin, "but get a head start now. We'll meet you later."

Unwelcome satellite, the machine continued to circle Kirsi.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dust.
Steam.
Death.
Oblivion.

That list pretty much inventoried the status of Kirsi's surface. Orbital weapons probed down to the planet's substrata.

The boojum, you see, wanted to be *sure*.

The ready rooms were clusters of variously decorated chambers color-keyed to whatever mood the waiting pilots wished. This dawn, the pilots had tended to gather together in either the darkest, most somber rooms, or else the most garishly painted. Seeking privacy, Holt conducted Morgan to a chamber finished in light wood with neutral, sand-colored carpets.

Holt told the room to shut off the background music. It complied. The man and woman sat opposite one another at a small table and stared across their mugs of steaming caf.

Morgan finally said, "So, are you frightened?"

"Not yet." Holt slowly shook his head. "I haven't had time yet. I expect I will be."

She laughed. "When the time comes, when that machine looms up as sharp and forbidding as the Shraketooth Peaks, then I expect I'll shake from terror."

"And after that?" said Holt.

"And then I'll just do my job."

He leaned toward her over the table and touched her free hand. "I want to do the same." She almost imperceptibly pulled her fingers back.

"I know something of your career," said Morgan. "I pay attention to the stats. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Holt reacted to a nuance in her tone. "I'm not *that* much younger than you. I just haven't had quite as much experience."

"That's not what I meant." This time she touched his hand. "I wasn't making light of your youth. I've watched the recordings of your skill as a young fighter pilot. What I'm wondering about is what it took to get there . . ."

Her words lay in the air as an invitation. Holt started to relax just a little. Their fingers remained lightly touching.

It was rarely simple or easy for Holt to explain how he had been raised in the wild by the 'Reen. A casual listener might toss it off as a joke or an elaborate anecdote. But then Holt rarely talked about his background with anyone. The few hearers invariably were impressed with his sincerity.

He found himself not at all reluctant to tell Morgan.

Simply put, Holt had been set out on a hillside to die, while only an infant, by the North Terrea villagers. In the laissez-faire way of all Almira, no one had wanted to take the rap for doing in the baby. It all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The latest sf triumph from a Nebula Grand Master!

Cover illustration by Don Dixon

LIFEBURST
Jack Williamson

When Halo Station was attacked by aliens, one inhabitant was eager to leave: young Quin Dain wished to find his father and receive the Sunmark, symbol of fitness for life in space. But once on Earth, Quin found himself framed for murder—and on the run from more than one evil adversary....

On Sale in November

DEL REY

A Del Rey Hardcover $12.95

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had something to do with Holt's parents who had perished under hazy circumstances that had never been explained to their son's satisfaction—but then, that circumspection was part of the eventual pact between Holt and the villagers.

At any rate, following the death of his parents, a very young Holt Calder had been placed on the steep, chilly flank of a small mountain, presumably to perish. Within hours, he was found by a roving band of 'Reen hunters. The 'Reen were a stocky, carnivorous, mammalian, sentient species with mythically (according to the human settlers) nasty temperaments—but in spite of colonists' scare-the-children stories, they didn't eat human babies. Instead the 'Reen hunters hissed and grumbled around the infant for a while, discussing this incredible example of human irresponsibility, and then transported the baby down to North Terrea. Under cover of the night, they sneaked past the sentries and deposited Holt Calder at the threshold of the assembly hall.

North Terrea held a village meeting the next night and again voted—although by a smaller margin than the first time—to set Holt back out on a hillside.

It took longer for a 'Reen band to happen across the infant this time. Holt was nearly dead of exposure. Rather than return him to what the 'Reen presumed would be a barbaric and certain death, they took him into their own nomadic tribe.

For a decade, Holt grew up speaking the rough sibilance of the 'Reen tongue. There were certainly times when he realized he was much less hairy than his fellows in the tribe, that his claws and teeth were far less impressive, and that he didn't possess the distinctive flank stripe, lighter than the surrounding fur. The 'Reen went to pains to keep Holt from feeling too much the estrangement of his differentness. The boy was encouraged to rough-house with his fellow cubs. He enjoyed the love of a mated couple who had lost their offspring to a human trap.

After a certain rotation of long winters, though, the 'Reen determined it would be a kinder thing to return Holt to his original people. The time had come for the 'Reen his age to join the Calling. It was a rite of adulthood, and something the 'Reen suspected Holt would never be capable of. So regretfully they deposited him on his twelfth birthday (though none of them knew it) on the threshold of the North Terrea assembly hall.

Holt had not wanted to go. The humans found him in the morning, trussed warmly and securely in a cured skelk hide. Before sunset, Holt had escaped onto the tundra and found his 'Reen band again. They patiently discussed this matter with him. Then they again made him helpless and spirited him into North Terrea.

This time the villagers put the boy under benevolent guard. That night the assembly met for a special session and everyone agreed to take Holt in.

They taught him humanity, starting with their language. They groomed and dressed him in ways different from how he had previously

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been groomed and dressed. After a time, he agreed to stay. 'Reen-ness receded; humanity advanced.

The passage of more than a decade had brought about certain social changes in North Terrea. The inhabitants wanted to forget the affair of the elder Calders. They plowed their guilt and expiation into rearing the son. And there were those who feared him.

When Holt reached young manhood, it was readily apparent to all who would notice that he was a superior representative of all the new adults in the community. It only followed that his incorporation into the North Terrea population should be balanced with a magnificent gesture. The assembly picked him to be the primary public investment of the North Terrea community partnership.

And that is why they purchased him the second-hand fighting ship, refurbished it, paid for Holt's training, and sent him out to seek his own way, incidentally returning handsome regular bonus dividends to the investors.

Years after his return to human society, Holt had again essayed a return visit to the 'Reen. The nomads traveled a regular, if wide-ranging, circuit and he had found both the original band and his surviving surrogate parent. But it hadn't been the same.

PereSnik't, the silver-pelted shaman of the band, had sadly quoted to Holt from the 'Reen oral tradition: "You can't come home again."

"But aren't you curious about what your parents did to trigger their mysterious fate?" said Morgan, somewhat incredulous.

"Of course," Holt said, "but I'd assumed I'd have a lifetime to find out. I didn't suspect I'd wind up zapped into plasma somewhere in Kirsi orbit."

"You won't be." Morgan pressed his fingers lightly. "Neither of us will be."

Holt said nothing. Morgan's eyes were ellipsoid, catlike, and marvelously green.

Morgan met the directness of his look. "What was that about the Calling," she said, "when the 'Reen returned you to North Terrea?"

He shook himself, eyes refocusing on another place and time. "Though the Almiran colonists didn't want to admit it, the 'Reen have a culture. They are as intelligent in their way as we are in ours—but their civilization simply isn't as directed toward technology. It didn't have to progress in that line.

"The 'Reen can manipulate tools if they wish—but usually they choose not to. They are hunters—but they have few hunting weapons. That's where the Calling comes in."

He paused for a drink of caf. Morgan remained silent.

"I'm not an ethnologist, but I've picked up more about the 'Reen by living with them than all the deliberate study by the few humans who showed interest through the centuries." Holt chuckled bitterly. "A formal examination would have led to communication, and that to a de facto acknowledgment of intelligence. And *that* would have brought the ethical

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

issue of human expansionism into the open." He shook his head. "No, far better to pretend the 'Reen mere extraordinarily clever beasts."

"I grew up in Oxmare," said Morgan. "I didn't think much about the 'Reen one way or another."

Holt looked mildly revolted. "Here's what I'll tell you about the Calling. It's one of the central 'Reen rituals. I'm not sure I understand it at all, but I'll tell you what I know."

It's one of the earliest of my memories.

The 'Reen band was hungry, as they so often were. Shortly before dawn, they gathered in the sheltered lee of the mountain, huddled against the tatters of glacial wind that intermittently dipped and howled about them.

There was little ceremony. It was simply something the band *did*.

The shaman PereSnik't, his pelt dark and vigorous, stood at their fore, supporting the slab of rock between his articulated paws. On the flat surface he had painted a new representation of an adult skelk. The horned creature was depicted in profile. PereSnik't had used warm earth colors, the hue of the skelk's spring coat. All the 'Reen—adult, young, and the adopted one—looked at the painting hungrily.

PereSnik't had *felt* the presence of the skelk. It was in hunting range, in Calling range. He led his people in their chant:

"You are near.
"Come to us,
"As we come to you.
"With your pardon,
"We shall kill you
"And devour you,
"That we, the People,
"Might live."

The chant repeated again and again, becoming a litany and finally a roundelay, until the voices wound together in a tapestry of sound that seemed to hang in the air of its own accord.

PereSnik't laid down the effigy upon the bare ground and the voices stopped as one. The pattern of sound still hung there, stable even as the winds whipped through the encampment. The shaman said, "The prey approaches."

The hunters accompanied him in the direction he indicated. Shortly they encountered the skelk walking stiffly toward them. The hunters cast out in the Calling and perceived, overlaid on the prey's muscular body, the life-force, the glowing network of energy that was the true heart of the animal. With an apology to the beast, PereSnik't dispassionately *grasped* that heart, halting the flow of energy as the hunters chanted once more. The skelk stumbled and fell, coughed a final time and died as a thin stream of blood ran from its nostrils. Then the 'Reen dragged the carcass back to the tribe. Everyone ate.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

From the dunes of Frank Herbert to the chronicles of Thomas Convenant to the delights of Tolkien...

Experience ALL the best-selling hard-to-find Science Fiction and Fantasy you dare to imagine... in low-cost paperbacks.

If you crave the excitement and adventure of good science fiction and fantasy but hate waiting in line to buy your favorites...If you buy a lot but hate to pay expensive hardcover prices...If you want them all but don't want to join a book club ...It's time you discovered the **other** way to buy the bestsellers. A way that's quick, convenient and easy on your pocketbook—The Shop-At-Home Science Fiction and Fantasy Paperback Catalog!

Over 650 Titles to choose from!

If you shopped for months you'd never find the 100's of bestsellers you find in minutes in The Shop-At-Home Science Fiction and Fantasy Paperback Catalog. Robert Heinlein, Frank Herbert, Phillip Jose Farmer, Star Wars, Battlestar Gallactica...all the best science fiction and fantasy storytellers are here. Not just one or two of an author's titles, but everything in print! And the largest selection of popular adult science fiction and fantasy available. Over 650 titles in all, from hard-to-find to soon-to-be released. All in the most inexpensive paperback editions!

Having The Shop-At-Home Science Fiction and Fantasy Paperback Catalog is like having the bookstore come to you. Not just any bookstore. But one that specializes in out-of-this-world adventure! And unlike high pressure clubs there are no catches or rules. You buy any number of books when **you** want to buy them. No "automatic shipments" of books you never ordered but have to pay for!

Easy ordering, fast delivery!

Ordering from The Shop-At-Home Science Fiction and Fantasy Paperback Catalog is easy. You can charge books by mail or over the phone (for even speedier service). No waiting on out-of-stock titles...our giant inventory ensures prompt delivery. Right to your door, of course. And you pay only a minimum handling charge for the luxury of shopping at home—unhurried and hassle-free.

How to Order your Shop-At-Home Catalog Right Away.

To receive The Shop-At-Home Science Fiction and Fantasy Catalog, send $1.00 with the coupon below. Then sit back and prepare for excitement in the comfort of your armchair...at prices you can always afford. Shopping at home for bestsellers. Once you've tried it, you'll find there is no other way.

☐ I want to shop at home for best-selling sci-fi and fantasy at low paperback prices! Rush me The Shop-At-Home Science Fiction and Fantasy Paperback Catalog. I've enclosed $1.00 to cover postage and handling.

☐ Send me all five Shop-At-Home Paperback Catalogs —Science Fiction and Fantasy, Mystery, Western, Romance, and Fiction/Non-Fiction. I've enclosed *$2.00 to cover postage and handling.*

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Mail coupon to:
BOOK MAILING SERVICE
Box 690 Dept A-4
Rockville Center, NY 11571

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sympathetic magic," said Morgan, her eyes slightly narrowed. "That's what it sounds like."

"When I became human—" Holt's voice wavered for just a moment. "—I was taught there is no magic."

"Do you really believe that?" said Morgan. "Call it a form of communal telekinesis, then. It makes sense that the 'Reen wouldn't evolve a highly technological culture. They have no need—not if they can satisfy basic requirements such as food with a rudimentary PK ability."

"I didn't have the power," said Holt. "I couldn't join in the Calling. I could only use my teeth and claws. I couldn't be truly civilized. That's why they finally sent me back."

There was a peculiar tone in his voice, the melancholy resonance of someone who has been profoundly left out. She reached for his hand and squeezed it.

"I would guess," she said, "we've greatly underestimated the 'Reen."

Holt coughed, the sound self-conscious and artificial. "What about you?" he said. "I know you're an extraordinary warrior. But I've also heard people call you the—" He hesitated again. "—the obnoxious little rich kid."

Morgan laughed. "I'm a remittance woman," she said.

He stared at her blankly.

Morgan Kai-Anila had been born and reared, as had been the eight previous generations of her line, in Oxmare. The family redoubt reposed in austere splendor not too many kilometers to the south of Wolverton, capital city of Victoria continent. The glass and wood mansion, built with the shrewdly won fortunes of the Kai-Anilas, had been Morgan's castle as a girl. Child of privilege, she played endless games of pretend, spent uncountable chilly afternoons reading, or watching recordings of bygone times, and programmed a childhood of adventurous dreams. She expected to grow up and become mistress of the manor. Not necessarily Oxmare. But someone's manor somewhere.

That didn't happen.

When the right age arrived, Morgan discovered there was no one whose manor she wished to manage—and that apparently was because her family had simply reared her to be *too* independent (at least that's what one of her frustrated suitors claimed). Actually Morgan had simply come to the conclusion that she wanted to play out the adventures she had lived vicariously as a child.

Fine, said her family. As it happened, Morgan was the third and last-born of her particular generation of Kai-Anilas. Her eldest sister was in line to inherit the estates. Morgan didn't mind. She knew she should always be welcome on holidays at Oxmare. Her middle sister also found a distinctive course. That one joined the clergy.

And finally Morgan's family gave her a ship, an allowance, and their blessing. The dreamer went into private (and expensive) flight training, and came out the sharpest image of a remittance woman. Now she was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a hired soldier. In spite of the source of their riches, her family really wasn't entirely sure of the respectability of her career.

The Kai-Anila family had fattened on aggressive centuries of supplying ships and weapons to the mercenary pilots who fought the symbolic battles and waged the surrogate wars that by-and-large settled the larger political wrangles periodically wracking Almira. Symbolic battles and surrogate wars were just as fatal as any other variety of armed clash to the downed, blasted, or lasered pilots, but at least the civilian populations were mostly spared. Slip-ups occasionally happened, but there's no system without its flaws.

A little leery of societal gossip, the increasingly image-conscious Kai-Anila family started trying to give Morgan more money if she would come home to Oxmare less frequently for holidays. The neighbors—who watched the battlecasts avidly—were beginning to talk. The only problem was that Morgan couldn't be bribed. She was already sending home the bonuses she was earning for being an exemplary warrior. Her nieces and nephews worshiped her. She had a flare for armed combat, and Runagate couldn't have been a better partner in the fighter symbiosis.

Her family did keep trying to find her an estate she could mistress. It didn't work. The woman liked what she was doing. There would always be time later for mistressing, she told her parents and aunts and uncles.

In the meantime, she found another pilot she thought she might love. He turned out to be setting her up for an ambush in a complicated three-force continental brouhaha. She found herself unable to kill him. She never forgot.

Morgan found another person to love, but he accidentally got himself in her sights during a night-side skirmish on the moon Loathing. Runagate was fooled as well, and her lover died. For the time being, then, Morgan concentrated on simply being the best professional of her breed.

Temporarily she gave up on people. After all, she loved her ship.

"I don't think I love Bob," said Holt. "After all, he's just a ship." Holt looked flushed and mildly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

"You haven't lived with him as long as I have with Runagate," said Morgan. "Just wait."

"Maybe it's that you're another generation." Morgan's eyebrows raised and she looked at him peculiarly. He quickly added, "I mean, just by a few years. You spend a lot of time on appearances. Style."

Morgan shrugged. "I can back it up. You mean things like the sound and motion simulators?"

He nodded.

"Don't you have them installed?"

Holt said, "I never turn them on."

"You ought to try it. It's not just style, to come roaring down on your target from out of the sun. It helps the pilot. If nothing else, it's a morale factor. The meds say it's linked to your epinephrine feed, not to mention the old reptile cortex. It can be the edge that keeps you alive."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The man shook his head, unconvinced.

"Soul-baring done?"

They both turned. Tanzin stood in the doorway. Bogdan and Amaranth loomed behind her. "Mind if we bring our caf in here?"

The five of them sat and drank and talked and paced. It seemed like hours later that Dr. Epsleigh walked into the ready room. She handed them data-filled sheets. "The departure rosters," she said.

Amaranth scanned his and scowled. "I'm not blasting for Kirsi until the final wave?"

"Nor I?" said Tanzin.

Nor were Holt and Morgan.

"I'm going," said Bogdan, looking up from his sheet.

"Then I shall join you," Amaranth said firmly. He looked at Dr. Epsleigh. "I volunteer."

The administrator shook her head. "I hadn't wanted to save *all* my seasoned best for the last." She paused and smiled, and this time the smile was warm. "I want reserves who know what they're about—so *both* of you will go later."

The two large men looked dismayed.

"All your ships are still being readied," said Dr. Epsleigh. "Obviously I'm saving some of my best for last. Cheer up, Chmelnyckyj."

Bogdan looked put out. Morgan stared down at the table. Holt and Tanzin said nothing.

"I know the waiting's difficult," said Dr. Epsleigh, "but keep trying to relax. It will be a little while yet. Soon enough I'll send you out with your thimbles and forks and hope."

They looked at her with bewilderment, as she turned to go.

Morgan was the only one who nodded. Runagate shrilled in her ear, "*I* know, *I* know. It's from that snark poem."

"I hate waiting," Amaranth said toward the departing Dr. Epsleigh. "I should like to volunteer to join the first sortie."

The administrator ignored him. They waited.

Since the machine had no sense of whimsy, it couldn't have cared whether it was called a boojum, a snark, or anything else. It would respond to its own code from its fellow destruction machines or its base, but had no other interest in designation.

It detected the swarm of midges long before they arrived near Kirsi's orbit. The boojum registered the number, velocity, mass, and origin of the small ships, as well as noting the tell-tale hydrogen torches propelling them.

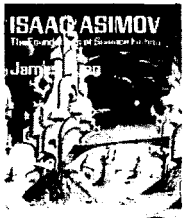
No problem.

The machine was done scouring Kirsi anyway. It registered a sufficiently high probability that no life-form beyond a virus or the occasional bacterium existed anywhere on the planetary surface.

The boojum accelerated out of its parking orbit and calculated a tra-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Discover the Facts Behind the Fiction



Heinlein, Asimov, Stapledon, Wells—what made these great writers produce their astonishing works of fiction? What events in their own lives shaped their visions of the future? What cultural and scientific changes influenced them? And what do their sometimes bizarre tales really have to say?

Now you can gain a deeper appreciation of the work of your favorite authors with the **Science Fiction Writers** series. Find out:

- How a stormy adolescence set against the cataclysmic 1930s caused Isaac Asimov to embark on the *Foundation* series
- How a case of tuberculosis and an ad in *Thrilling Wonder Stories* launched Heinlein's writing career
- How Darwin influenced H.G. Wells
- How Olaf Stapledon's richly inventive but difficult fiction influenced Arthur Clarke, Poul Anderson, Kurt Vonnegut and many others.

Each volume in the **Science Fiction Writers** series treats an author of distinction. Together the volumes do full justice to science fiction as a pervasive force in western culture.

Special Offer!

To: Oxford University Press
Dept. ECAB, 200 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016

Please send me:

Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction by James Gunn
☐ cloth $18.95 ☐ paper $6.95

Robert Heinlein: America as Science Fiction by H. Bruce Franklin
☐ cloth $22.50 ☐ paper $4.95

The Science Fiction of H.G. Wells by Frank McConnell
☐ cloth $22.50 ☐ paper $4.95

Olaf Stapledon: A Man Divided by Leslie Fiedler
☐ $19.95 ☐ paper $7.95

Order 2 or more books and get 20% off list prices

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

I enclose my check/money order for $_____ *(Please add appropriate sales tax.)*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

jectory that would meet the advancing fleet at a precise intermediary point. Weapons systems checks showed no problems.

Time passed subjectively for the pilots of the first wave of Almiran ships.

Counters in the boojum ticked off precise calibrations of radioactive decay, but the machine felt no suspense at all.

The Almirans joined the battle when their ships were still hundreds of kilometers distant from the boojum. Their target was too far away to try lasers and charged beam weapons. Missiles pulled smoothly away from launching bays, guidance computers locking on the unmistakable target. If the guidance comps, in their primitive way, felt any rebellious qualm about firing on their larger cousin, there was no indication—just a few score fire-trails arcing away toward the boojum.

The missiles reached the point in space the machine had picked as the outer limit of its defensive sphere. The boojum used them for ranging practice. Beams speared out, catching half the incoming missiles at once. Dozens of weapons flared in sparkling sprays and faded. The machine erected shields, wavery nets of violet gauze, and most of the remaining missiles sputtered out. A handful of missiles had neared the machine before the nets of energy went up and were already inside the shields. More beams flicked out and the missiles died like insects in a flame. One survivor impacted on the boojum's metal surface. Minor debris mushroomed slowly outward, but the machine did not appear affected.

"That's one tough borker," said the first wave leader to his fellows.

Then the boojum began alternating its protective fields in phase with its offensive weapons. Beams lanced toward the nearing Almirans. Some pilots died instantly, bodies disintegrating with the disrupted structures of their ships. Others took evasive action, playing out complex arabesques with the dancing, killing beams. More missiles launched. More lasers and beam weapons were directed toward the boojum. Fireworks proliferated.

But eventually everyone died. No pilot survived. Information telemetry went back to Almira, so there was a record, but no fighters or pilots of the first wave returned.

The boojum lived.

Its course toward Almira did not alter.

The second wave of Almiran fighters held its position, waiting for counsel, waiting for orders, waiting. The third and final wave sat on the ground.

"I won't say that's what we expected would happen, but it was certainly a possibility we feared." Dr. Epsleigh turned away from the information screens. The others in the room were quiet, deadly silent, as an occasional sob escaped. Faces set in grim lines. Tears pooled in more than a few eyes.

"Now what?" said Tanzin quietly.

Morgan asked, "Will we join the second wave of fighters?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Most of the hundred pilots in the briefing hall nodded. Weight shifted. Chairs scraped noisily. Noses were blown into handkerchiefs.

Holt said, "What is the plan now?"

"Bad odds I can live with," said Amaranth, stretching his massive arms, joints cracking. "Assured mortality does not thrill me."

Dr. Epsleigh surveyed the room. "I've conferred with the Princess Elect and every strategist, no matter how oddball, we can round up. Given time, we might be able to rig heavier armaments, plan incredibly Byzantine strategies. There is no time." She stopped.

"So?" said Tanzin.

"We're open to ideas." Dr. Epsleigh looked around the room again, scrutinizing each face in turn.

The silence seemed to dilate endlessly.

Until Morgan Kai-Anila cleared her throat. "An idea," she said. Everyone stared at her. "Not me." She slowly pointed. "Him."

And everyone stared at Holt.

"I don't think it will work," said Holt stubbornly.

"Have you got a better idea?" Morgan said.

The young man shook his head in apparent exasperation. "It's like a bunch of kids trying to mount a colonization flight. They borrow their uncle's barn and start building a starship back behind the house."

Morgan said, "I hope my suggested plan is a bit more realistic."

"*Hope?* That machine out there just killed a whole borking planet!"

The woman said stiffly, "I *know* my plan has a chance."

"But how much of one?"

"Holt, can you come up with better?" Tanzin looked at him questioningly—almost, Holt thought, accusingly. He said nothing, only slowly shook his head. No. "In the final seconds before a combat run," Tanzin said, "you've got to choose a course." She shrugged. "If Occam's razor says your only option is faith, then that's what you fly with. Okay?" With her one good eye, she surveyed the others.

"All right, then." Morgan looked over at Dr. Epsleigh. The four of them had adjourned to a smaller office to consult. "Can you arrange transport? The fighters would be faster, but I doubt there's any place close to set down."

Dr. Epsleigh punched one final key on the desk terminal. "It's already done. There'll be a windhover waiting as soon as you get outside. Is it necessary you all go?"

"I really would like to accompany Holt," said Morgan. She glanced at Tanzin.

"I may as well stay here. If this cockamamie plan works, I can start the preparations from this end. Just keep me linked and informed."

Dr. Epsleigh said, "I'll get a larger transport dispatched to follow you north. If you can make progress and see some future in continuing this scheme, the transport will have plenty of space for your, um, friends."

"Are the villagers expecting us in North Terrea?" said Holt.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dr. Epsleigh nodded. Her tousled black hair fell into her eyes. She shook it back and blinked. Evidently she had been awake for a long time. "They're under a most extreme request to cooperate. I don't think you'll have any difficulty. Besides, you're the fair-haired local boy who made good, true?"

"See?" Morgan smiled tiredly and took Holt's arm. "You *can* come home again."

"Well," said Morgan, "I admit it's not the sort of jewel that Oxmare is." North Terrea sat in awesome desolation in the middle of a cold and windswept semi-arctic plain. The town was surrounded by ore processors, rolling mills, cracking towers flaring jets of flame, and all manner of rusting heavy machinery.

"It's grown since I was last here," said Holt.

"What brought colonists here first?" Morgan began to decelerate the windhover. The craft skimmed along two meters above frozen earth.

Holt shrugged. "Molybdenum, adamantium, titanium, it's hard to say. These plains used to be one of the 'Reen's great hunting preserves. That ended quickly. North Terrea was built in a day or so, the 'Reen were driven off, the game mostly left of its own accord. That which stayed either got shot by human hunters or was poisoned by industrial chemicals."

"Self-interest run rampant," mused Morgan. "Did no one ever try to put the brakes on?"

"I suspect a few did." Holt looked vague, almost wistful. "I don't think they got too far. There were livings to be made here, fortunes to be wrested from the ground." His tone turned angry and he looked away from her to the fast-expanding image of North Terrea.

"I'm sorry," she said, words almost too soft to hear.

There were indeed expected. A small group of townspeople waited for them as Morgan set the windhover down at North Terrea's tiny landing field. At first Morgan couldn't tell the gender of the members of the welcoming party. Dressed in long fur coats, they were obscured by falling snow. The great, light flakes drifted slowly down like leaves from autumn trees.

Morgan cut the windhover's fans and opened the hatch to a nearly palpable miasma of ice-cold industrial stench. She squinted against the flakes tickling her face and realized that some of the greeters wore thick beards. Presumably they were the men.

"I hope those coats are synthetics," said Holt, as much to himself as to Morgan, "or dyed skelk."

"I think they are," said Morgan, avoiding passing an expert opinion. They don't have any of the quality and gloss my parents' coats do, she carefully did not say aloud.

The greeting party trudged toward them across the landing pad, packed snow squeaking beneath their boots. Holt and Morgan climbed out of the cockpit and down past the ticking, cooling engine sounds.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Holt, my boy," said the man in the forefront, opening his arms for an embrace. Holt ignored the gesture and stood quietly, arms at his side. The man tried to recover by gesturing expansively. "It's been a while since we've seen you, son."

"Haven't the checks been arriving?" said Holt.

"Punctually, my boy," said the man. "Our civic fortunes rise with boring regularity, thanks to you and that fey ship of yours." He turned to address Morgan. "I forget my manners. I'm Kaseem MacDonald, the mayor hereabouts. The 'cast from Wolverton informed us you'd be Morgan Kai-Anila, true?"

Morgan inclined her head slightly.

"We've certainly heard of you," said the mayor. "We're all great fans."

Morgan again nodded modestly.

"There isn't much to do of a winter night other than to keep tabs on the narrowcast and see what fighters like you and our boy here are doing." Mayor MacDonald chuckled and clapped Holt on the shoulder. "Sure hope you two never have to go up against each other."

Holt spoke for the first time since alighting from the windhover. His voice was low. "I think there are arrangements for refueling us?"

"Plenty of time for that," said the mayor, head bobbing jovially as though it were on a spring. "Our grounders'll tank you up during the feast. Heh, grounders." He chuckled again. "We even pick up the talk from the 'casts."

"What feast?" said Holt and Morgan, almost together.

"We don't have time to fool around," said Morgan.

"I believe the message from the capital was a priority request," said Holt.

The other North Terreans looked on. Morgan didn't think they looked either particularly happy or hospitable.

Mayor MacDonald showed teeth when he grinned. "You need sustenance just as much as the windhover does. Besides, you can meet some of my local supporters and I know they'd love to meet you. I'm running for re-election again, you know."

"We can't do it," said Holt. "There's no time."

"I'm not saying a long dinner," said the mayor. "Just time to eat and say hello to the folks and be seen. Everybody can use a little reminder of where those venture investment checks come from."

"No," said Morgan. "I don't think so. We've got to—"

The mayor interrupted her smoothly. "—to get some nourishment and relaxation before continuing whatever your urgent mission is."

"No."

"Yes," said the mayor. "It's necessary. You'd be shocked, I'm sure, to learn how erratic the ground crew here can be when *they* aren't working refreshed and rested."

Morgan said, "Why, this is—"

This time it was Holt who interrupted her. "We'll take refreshment," he said, gaze locked on the mayor's. "It will be a brief delay."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mayor MacDonald beamed. "I'm sure your refueling will be as brief, and extremely complete and efficient."

Holt glanced at Morgan and smiled coldly at the mayor. "Then let's be about it."

The mayor waved toward the terminal building. "It isn't far, and warm transport awaits."

As the group trudged off across the field, it seemed to Morgan that she was feeling something like a sense of capture. The fur-coated North Terreans surrounding her reminded Morgan of great sullen animals. Their fur might be synthetic fiber, but it still stank in the moist fog that hung low over the town.

Starships descending atop stilts of flame.

Cargoes of frozen optimists being sledded into chromed defrosting centers.

Towns and villages carved out of tundra winterscapes.

The occasional city erected in the somewhat more temperate equatorial belt.

A developing world torn from wilderness.

The triumph of a people.

Heaps of slain 'Reen piled beyond the revetments of a fort constructed from ice blocks.

Morgan stared at the lowering starships. "That's not right," she said bemusedly. "The big ships stayed in orbit. The shuttles brought the passengers and supplies down. Then the larger vessels were disassembled and ferried down to be used as raw materials. I learned all that when I was three."

"It's artistic license," Holt answered, his own gaze still fixed on the scene of the slaughtered 'Reen. "Historical accuracy is not the virtue most prized in North Terrea." In the fresco in front of him, the attackers had outnumbered the beleaguered humans by at least ten to one.

"It's not that good, just as art," said Morgan. The mayor's circular dining room was lined with the sequence of historical frescoes. "And it really doesn't trigger my appetite."

Other dinner guests were filtering into the room and beginning to sit at the semi-circular tables. The mayor was off in the kitchen on some unspecified errand. Holt said, "The good people of North Terrea are pragmatists. When the community decided to pay lip service to culture and proclaim a painter laureate, the choice of frescoes in here rather than any other medium was because the plaster would lend an additional layer of insulation."

"Laying it on with a trowel, eh, boy?" said Mayor MacDonald, coming up behind them. "I hope you both are hungry." Without his long fur coat, the mayor looked almost as bulky, dark signs of hirsuteness curling from sleeve-ends and at his collar. The blue-black beard curled down to midsternum. "Skelk steaks, snow oysters, my wife's preserves from last green season, shrake liver paté, barley gruel; let me tell you, it's one extravagant meal."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We're grateful," said Morgan. "Can we start soon?"

"In a blink, my dear." Both Morgan and Holt felt a heavy, mayoral hand descend on a shoulder. Mayor MacDonald raised his voice and said, "All right, friends, citizens, guild-mates. On behalf of all of us who make up the populace of North Terrea, I want to welcome formally our guests; Holt, here, who I know you all remember fondly—" His hand clamped down; long, powerful fingers paternally crushing Holt's clavicle. "—and Morgan Kai-Anila, the splendid contract pilot so many of us have watched and admired on late-night battlecasts." Warned by the look on Holt's face, Morgan had tensed her shoulder muscles. It was still difficult not to wince.

The scattering of applause around the dining room did not seem over-enthusiastic.

"Our boy here," continued the mayor, "and his friend, are just passing through. As best I can figure, they're hadjing off on some solemn but secret mission for our kin down in Wolverton. Naturally we here in North Terrea are delighted to lend whatever aid we can in this mysterious activity."

Neither Holt nor Morgan decided to pick up the cue.

"Now I have a theory," said Mayor MacDonald, "that all this has something to do with the rumors about someone attacking our neighbor world toward the sun. If that's so, then we all can wish only the best fortune to these two, Pilots Calder and Kai-Anila."

The applause was a bit more prolonged this time.

Servers had started to carry in platters of steaming food. The mayor motioned them toward him. "Let our guests eat first." The food looked and smelled good. Morgan and Holt showed no reluctance to dish themselves respectable portions of steaks, biscuits, and vegetables.

"As we share this food today—" Mayor MacDonald lifted his arms to gesture around the circle of frescoes. "—I hope you'll all reflect for just a moment on our four centuries of hardfought progress on this world. Our ancestors left their friends, sometimes their families, certainly their worlds and indeed their entire human civilization to seek out this planetary system. Our new worlds were remote from the interference and paternalism of the old order." The mayor looked far above them all, focusing on something invisible. "I think we've done well with our self-generated opportunities." He looked back at them then, meeting eyes and smiling. The smile widened to a grin. "Let's eat."

The applause seemed clapped with unabashed sincerity.

"Not the election rhetoric I'd have expected," said Holt in a low voice to Morgan. "He must be waiting to sink in the hook later."

"I'm not hungry!" The voice was loud and angry enough to rise above the dinner hubbub. The speaker was a young woman about Morgan's age. Her dark hair was piled atop her head. Her high collar displayed a delicate spray of lace, but her expression belied her appearance.

By now the mayor had sat down to Morgan's right. Holt sat to her left. "Is something amiss, Meg?" said Mayor MacDonald. He held a piece of meat only slightly smaller than a skelk haunch in one hand.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Only the company of this meal," said the woman called Meg. Other conversation around the tables died away. "It's one thing entirely to dine with Holt Calder. I might not like it, but I recognize the necessity of letting him eat with us. We're all quite aware where our community's investment bonuses originate." She glared toward Morgan. "No, it's *her* I register an objection to."

Morgan's voice was a bit higher than her usual controlled tone. She half arose from her chair. "What's your objection? I've done nothing to you."

Meg rose from her own chair. "It's who you *are*," said the woman, "not just who sits before us." She pointed. "Aristocrats . . . You are a blood-bloated, privileged parasite on the body politic." Meg appeared to savor the words.

Morgan shook her head in astonishment and then sat back down.

The mayor looked unhappy. "I said," he repeated, "let's eat."

Meg stalked out of the dining room. Those around her developed an abiding interest in the serving platters, in gravy and chops.

Holt touched Morgan's shoulder. She flinched away.

"My sympathies," Mayor MacDonald said to her. In a confiding tone, he added, "The external universe is not an easy commodity to sell here. I fear we don't find Holt as comfortable a dining companion as we might wish." He turned back toward the young man. "Just between you and me, lad, I couldn't blame you if you found the world not worth saving." Mayor MacDonald put an index finger to his lips. "Just don't let on to my loyal constituents I said that." He looked at the great hunk of meat in his other hand. "And now," he said, apparently addressing the food, "and now, let us eat."

The windhover skated across the tundra ground-blizzards with full tanks, barely rocking in the gusts. The pilot and passenger rode with full bellies and an anxious sense of anticipation.

"That's it, isn't it?" said Morgan. "That peak off to the east."

Holt nodded.

"Where now?"

Holt gave her a compass heading.

"How do you know? I thought the bands roamed."

"They do," said Holt. "Back at the field, I stood in the open air. Even with the inversion layer I could tell. I know the season. I can feel the patterns. The temperature, the wind, it's all there." He came close to pressing his nose against the port. "The pieces fit."

Morgan glanced sideways at him. "And is there," she said carefully, "perhaps a little bit of instinct, something unquantifiable in the pattern?"

"No," he said flatly.

"I wonder."

Holt repeated the compass direction.

"Aye, sir." Morgan swung the windhover to a north-by-northwesterly heading. A range of jagged mountains loomed in the distance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You weren't particularly friendly back in the town," said Morgan.

"I wasn't feeling cordial. I hope friendship awaits me now." His words were overly formal, a bit stilted, as though a different identity were being overlaid on the young man Morgan had met in Wolverton.

"You know," said Morgan, "aside from being presumably competent and obviously a good fighter, you're quite an attractive young man."

Holt didn't answer. Morgan thought she saw the beginnings of a flush at the tips of his ears. She started to consider the ramifications. She wondered whether her own ears—or anything else—betrayed her.

They found the encampment—or at least *an* encampment—just as Holt had predicted. Morgan circled slowly, to give the 'Reen plenty of warning. "Skins?" she said. "They live in hide tents?"

"Look beyond," Holt answered. "There are openings for the dug-out chambers. Even though they're nomadic for most of the year, the 'Reen open earthen tunnels for the heart of the winter. It's a retreat to an earlier life. They dig the passages with their claws. You'll see."

And so she did. Morgan set the windhover down and cut the fans. The mechanical whine ran down the scale, fading to silence. Holt cracked the hatch and they heard the wind shriek. Heat rushed from the craft, to be replaced with darting, stinging snow and a marrow-deep chill.

Morgan glanced out and recoiled slightly. While she had been engaged in shutting down the windhover, a silent perimeter of 'Reen had come to encircle the craft. Not, she reflected, that she could have heard them in this gale anyway.

She had never before seen the 'Reen in the flesh. Films had not done them justice. Morgan squinted against the sudden flurry of snowflakes slapping her face. The 'Reen appeared bulky, not as though they could move quickly at all. The woman knew that perception was utterly wrong. She also knew the 'Reen were equally adept on all fours as upright. These adults were standing erect, as high as her shoulder. Their fur color was rich brown, ranging from deep chocolate to a golden auburn.

The sun abruptly burned through the gray sky and Morgan saw the light glitter from the 'Reen claws. Those claws were long and curved like scimitars. They looked as honed as machined steel. The silence, other than the wind's keening, stretched on.

"It's up to you now, isn't it?" she finally said to Holt.

He made a sound that might have been a sigh; then moved forward through the hatch, dropping down to the intermediate step and then to the snow. She followed as he approached the 'Reen squarely facing the hatch. Wind ruffled the auburn pelt. Obsidian eyes tracked the newcomers.

"Quaag hreet'h, PereSnik't tcho?" Holt's voice, ordinarily a baritone, seemed to drop at least one gruff, uncomfortable octave.

At first the 'Reen seemed to ignore his words, staring back silent and unmoving. It responded as Holt stepped forward and raised both empty palms facing the 'Reen. The man said something brief Morgan couldn't catch. The 'Reen spoke something in return. Then man and 'Reen embraced roughly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Morgan thought instantly of how she used to hug her huge stuffed creatures when she was a girl, damped the incongruous response, but said under her breath, "I think this is a good sign."

The 'Reen turned its attention to her, cocking its head back slightly. Morgan stared past the blunt muzzle into unblinking, shiny, black eyes. The 'Reen articulated sounds. Holt replied in kind. Then the man turned toward Morgan.

"His short-form name translates as MussGray. He is an artificer, uh, an artist, apprenticed to PereSnik't, the tribal shaman. He says to tell you he's honored to meet one who is vouched for by He-orphaned-and-helpless-whom-we-obliged-are-to-take-in-but-why-us?"

"That's you?" Morgan couldn't help but smile. "I'd like to hear all *that* in 'Reen."

"You did." Holt didn't smile. "The 'Reen tongue is quite economical."

"Tcho. PereSnik't tcho." The 'Reen called MussGray turned and started to walk toward the nearest hide shelter. Morgan noted that the 'Reen's rounded shoulders hunched forward as he moved. Holt followed. "Follow me," he said back to Morgan, who had hesitated. "It's what we came to do."

"I know, I know," she muttered. "And it was my idea."

The other 'Reen had made what to her ears seemed whuffling noises and dispersed among the hide shelters of the encampment.

MussGray led them through a doorway protected by a heavy flap of cured leather. Inside, the shelter was dimly illuminated by the flicker of a few candles. Morgan saw a thin column of apparent smoke drifting up from the room's center, then realized it was rising from a circular hole in the earthen floor.

"That's where we're going," Holt said to her. "Don't worry."

MussGray vanished into the smoke, into the hole. Holt followed. So did Morgan, discovering the top of a sturdy wooden ladder. She clambered down the rungs, attempting to hold her breath, trying not to cough and choke on the smoke. Beside the foot of the ladder, a low fire was separated from the opening of a fresh-air shaft by an upright stone slab.

This chamber also was lit with candles, only slightly abetted by the dusky fire. The interior seemed rounded and close. The place smelled of fresh earth and woodsmoke and a muskiness Morgan did not find unpleasant. Five 'Reen waited there. Morgan took them to be older adults, pelts silvered to an argent that seemed to glow in the candlelight.

"They honor us," Holt said to her. "The 'Reen are nocturnal. Our greeting party up there tumbled out of warm burrows to meet us."

The 'Reen reclined in the shadows on the luxuriant furs blanketing the chamber's floor. Then the largest and most silvered of the adults stood and embraced Holt for a long time. Morgan heard the man say simply, "PereSnik't."

Later he introduced Morgan. The woman, half-remembering one bit of biological trivia about showing one's teeth, inclined her head a moment, but didn't smile.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then they all made themselves comfortable on the heaps of autumnal black-and-white skelk hides. "We'll need patience," Holt told Morgan. "Both of us. This will take a while. I have too little vocabulary, too few cognates, so I'm going to have to approximate some language as I go."

"Can I help?"

"Maybe," said Holt. "I don't know. I'm going to be improvising this as I go."

PereSnik't rumbled something.

"He says," Holt translated, "that you smell just fine to him."

Morgan covered her smile.

With MussGray, PereSnik't, and the other four 'Reen listening attentively, Holt told his story. He also used body language and a bit of theater. Morgan could decipher the gestures sufficiently to understand at which points in the narrative the boojum arrived in orbit around Kirsi, destroyed that world, and then advanced on the Almiran fighters. She found herself forcing back tears as Holt's long fingers described the rupture of ship after ship, his expressive features miming the final moments of her friends and comrades. Morgan clamped down on the feelings rigidly. Time enough later to mourn, and there would doubtless be many more to keen dirges for. She wondered whether, indeed, there would be anyone left alive to do the mourning.

At last Holt's monologue ceased and what seemed to be serious discussion began. Morgan hugged her knees, feeling a sense of disconnection. There was nothing now she could do to affect what was happening with the 'Reen. She had acted. If all catalyzed as she hoped, she would act again. But for now, she was reduced to sitting on plush furs and listening.

The interplay between Holt and the 'Reen became much more of a staccato exchange. Morgan thought of a ball hit back and forth across a net. She couldn't tell the content of what she heard, but was sure of the context: questions and answers.

As best Morgan could tell, internecine bickering was igniting among the silvered 'Reen. Growls, timbre sliding low, verging on subsonics, filled the underground chamber. Claws as long as her hand clicked and glittered while the candles began to burn down.

MussGray appeared to be taking a moderating role. He deferred to the older adults, but began to interject his own comments when the others roared at Holt.

These are carnivores, thought Morgan, staring at increasingly exposed teeth. They are predators, and they surely must hate us for all we have done to them. Except for Holt.

The discussion had reached a crescendo, a near-pandemonium.

Holt stood and slipped off his windbreaker as the 'Reen fell silent. He tugged his insulated shirt up over his head. His chest hair was not nearly so impressive as the 'Reen fur. Holt slowly raised his empty hands up and apart, forming the bar of a cross.

Morgan realized the man was exposing the vulnerability of his belly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The 'Reen voices began again to grumble and roar. Morgan wondered again if they were about to kill Holt; and after him, her. She had no weapons. Holt had insisted on that. She knew she could neither save him, nor beat a homicidal 'Reen up the central ladder.

Holt had *better* know what he was doing.

MussGray said something. PereSnik't said something else in turn. Holt hesitated, but then nodded his head slowly. Affirmatively. He drew his arms in, then proffered both hands in front of him.

It happened almost too quickly for Morgan to see. PereSnik't extended one paw, flicked out a razored claw, and blood traced a thin line down the inside of Holt's right index finger. The blood, black in candlelight, beaded and dripped for a moment before Holt closed his fist to stop the bleeding.

The 'Reen were silent again. MussGray looked from Holt to Morgan, and then back to the man. Shivering, Holt put his shirt and windbreaker back on. He shook his hand as though it stung.

"Are you all right?" Morgan said.

He answered a different question, one unspoken. "It's done."

"They'll help us?"

"The verdict's not in yet. There have to be . . . consultations. We're to wait here."

The 'Reen began to climb up the ladder. PereSnik't ascended without saying anything more to Holt. MussGray was the last to go. He turned back from the ladder and spoke briefly.

"He says that we should enjoy the shelter," said Holt. "There's a storm front passing above us. It shouldn't last long, but he says it will keep us from traveling for a few hours."

The 'Reen disappeared through the ceiling hole.

"Now what?"

"We wait," said Holt.

"Are you optimistic?"

The man shrugged.

"Are you simply tired of talking?"

Holt looked down at the furs around them. "Just . . . tired." Then he again raised his eyes to her face. One of the guttering candles flickered a final time and burned out. A second sputtered. "This is probably entirely too forward," he said, hesitating, and then saying nothing more.

"Yes?" she finally said, prompting him.

He met her gaze levelly. "I feel colder than even the storm warrants. Would you give me some reassurance?"

"Yes," she said, "and a good deal more, if you'd like."

Morgan reached to take him gently as the last of the candles went out and the only light was the lambent flames racing over the coals in the fire.

She hadn't *meant* to sleep, Morgan thought, as she moved and stretched under Holt's welcome weight. Since she couldn't recall when she *had*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

slept last, that probably explained her drifting off. Holt, not having slept at all, his upper body supported by his elbows, glanced toward the center of the chamber and said something in 'Reen. Someone answered. Morgan turned her head and made out MussGray's form limned by the coals at the foot of the ladder.

Holt gently disengaged himself and got to his knees. Her body tautened for a moment. He softly touched the side of her head with his fingers.

MussGray spoke again.

"We'll be ready," said Holt. "Their decision is made," he said to Morgan.

The two of them dressed quickly, unself-consciously. After all, she thought wryly, we're all soldiers, comrades in arms.

"Are they coming down here?"

"No," Holt said. "We're to go back above."

When they climbed the ladder and emerged from the hide shelter, they found a clear, cold starscape overhead. MussGray led them back to the windhover. Morgan saw that the skids were now covered with fresh snow.

PereSnik't and the other adult 'Reen, not just the silvered elders, waited. Bulked together in the night, they didn't seem to Morgan either ominous or an outright danger. They were simply at home there, not discomforted by the chill.

The two humans stopped a meter from PereSnik't. MussGray crossed over some intangible boundary and rejoined the tribe. He, too, faced Morgan and Holt.

The streamers of Almira's aurora began to play above the horizon. Ribbons of startling blue crackled into the sky.

PereSnik't said something. To Morgan, it seemed surprisingly brief. Holt let out his breath audibly.

"And—?" she said softly.

"It's done."

"Will they help?"

The dark mass of 'Reen stirred. PereSnik't said something to them over his shoulder.

"They will try to aid us," said Holt. "I *think* they understand what I attempted to get across. I'm more concerned about what *I* don't comprehend."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"They agreed." Holt shook his head. "But the terms of the bargain are open. I don't know the price. I'm not sure they do either."

"How expensive can it be?" Actually she had already begun to speculate. Night thoughts.

The man only smiled. In the shifting, ephemeral light of the aurora, it was not a smile of joy.

The machine swept steadily toward the waiting second wave of Almiran fighters. The ragtag fleet neither advanced nor retreated. The ships hung in position, interposing themselves as a flimsy shield between assassin and victim.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The machine electronically seined the inexorably diminishing distance between. It did not project a definitive probability-model of the humans' intention. It could not. The machine searched its memories for similar human strategies. Nothing quite matched. In its way, the machine considered what it perceived to be all the likely human options, attempting to place itself in its opponents' position. No answers emerged.

Electrons continued to spin in paths weaving patterns that simulated organic intelligence—only it was a mind far more carefully considered, infinitely more ordered than that of humans. There was no primitive animal forebrain here. No conscience. No irrationality. Only a paradox. A holographic representation of oblivion.

The boojum searched for any evidence of human trickery, signs of an ambush, but it could accumulate no empirical support.

It sailed on.

But as much as it was capable of doing, the machine wondered. . . .

"No?" said Morgan. *"No?"*

"No. With regrets." Dr. Epsleigh looked very unhappy. "The word came down from the Princess Elect's office a short time before Holt and you returned. I'd already dispatched the transport to pick up the 'Reen, but now I'll have to call it back."

Dr. Epsleigh's office at the Wolverton landing field was spare and austere. The four of them—Tanzin had been waiting for Holt and Morgan the moment the windhover set down—sat in straight-backed, unpadded chairs around a bare desk.

"But why?" Morgan thought that if she gripped the arms of her chair any more tightly, either the furniture or her fingers would snap.

"Spume," said Dr. Epsleigh.

"I don't understand," said Holt.

"It's the word the Prime Minister used." Dr. Epsleigh shrugged. "Moonfoam. Brainfroth. The point being he thought our plan was the silliest proposal of anything anyone had suggested. That's why the summary turn-down."

"I have to admit I can see his position," said Tanzin. She leaned back in her chair and stretched her legs, one boot crossed above the other. "It's akin to me saying, 'Hey, I've got a great idea—I think my pet is telepathic, and he can hypnotize the bird in the birdbath.' Then someone else says, 'Hey, it's so crazy, it might just work.' See the point?"

"I gave Morgan's suggestion preliminary approval," said Dr. Epsleigh angrily. "Are you suggesting this is all a pipe-dream? We're in a desperate situation."

"Just a moment," Morgan said. "Hold on. Does the PM have a plan of his own?"

Dr. Epsleigh turned toward her, shaking her head in disgust. "It's death. I told him that, but he said it was the only rational option."

"Suicide." Tanzin inspected her boots. "Pure and simple."

"You don't like any of the alternatives," said Holt.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No." Tanzin's voice was somber. "No, I don't."

"Suicide?" said Morgan. "What did the PM *say?*"

Dr. Epsleigh gestured out the dawn-lit window toward the massed ranks of fighting ships. "One massive attack. Those ships carrying all the massed armament and fire-power that can be bonded on during the next few hours. Mass against mass. Brute force against force."

"The machine will win," said Holt.

"The PM knows that, I suspect. I also think he believes the machine will prevail in *any* account. A grand doomed gesture is apparently better than this half-baked scheme from a battle hero and a junior pilot." Dr. Epsleigh slapped her small hands down on the desk top with finality.

"No," said Morgan. They all looked at her. She said to Dr. Epsleigh, "Can you use your phone to get through to the Princess Elect's office? I want the woman herself."

Without a word, the administrator punched out a code.

"What are you doing?" said Holt. "I've heard the Princess Elect doesn't do a thing without the PM's approval."

"Have I given you my lecture on power?" Morgan said, without a pause for an answer to her rhetorical question. "I despise the power one is born to without earning it. I've never used that lever."

Dr. Epsleigh had reached someone on the phone. "Tell her the caller is Morgan Kai-Anila," she said.

"My personal rules are now suspended," Morgan said. "It's time for this 'blood-bloated, privileged parasite on the body politic' to kick some rears."

Dr. Epsleigh handed her the phone.

"Hello?" Morgan said. She forced a smile and let that smile seep into her voice. "Hello, Aunt Thea, dear?"

Steam curled up from the jet nozzles of the dart-shaped fighters. The rows of sleek fuselages formed a chevron, the point of which faced away from the administration complex of the landing field at Wolverton. The sun had sunk close to the western horizon, the twilight glow beginning to soften the peaks of the Shraketooth Range.

Swarms of workers surrounded the fighters, topping off water tanks, tuning each weapon, completing installation of the additional acceleration couches.

The briefing hall had become an auditorium of Babel. Intermixed, humans and 'Reen crowded the room. The sessions had been loud and volatile. Serving as translator, Holt had tried to mediate. The basic problem seemed to be that each group thought it was surrounded by unsavory barbarians.

The overtaxed air purifying system could no longer cope with the sweat and musk. Cheek by jowl, fur against flesh, luxuriant flank stripes juxtaposed with extravagantly theatrical uniforms, the warriors groused and growled as Dr. Epsleigh tried to keep peace.

About the height of the average 'Reen, the administrator had to stand

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on a chair to be seen by all in the room. Many of the pilots looked distinctly dubious after having listened through the first briefing sessions.

"I *know* you have questions," continued Dr. Epsleigh. "I recognize that we've been asking you to take all this in on faith. I also know I can't order any of you simply to be credulous."

Beside her, Holt translated for the benefit of the 'Reen.

"Just let me wrap it up," said Dr. Epsleigh. "The majority of pilots will have the essential task of harrying the boojum in whatever way and from whichever tangent they can. It will be your job to draw the machine's attention from the score of colleagues who will be ferrying our 'Reen allies as near to the enemy as is—" A wry smile broke across her lips. "—humanly possible."

Amaranth stood in the first row. "Isn't this just as foredoomed as the PM's idiotic plan?"

"If it were, I wouldn't endorse it." Dr. Epsleigh raised her eyes machineward. "It will be dangerous, yes. You'll all be dependent upon your wits and the abilities of your ships."

Amaranth nodded, amused. "It's never been any different."

The 'Reen whuffled and coughed at the translation. For them also, it was a point of commonality.

"We've exhaustively pored over the recordings of our first combat encounter with the machine," said Dr. Epsleigh. "So long as the boojum's missiles and beams are avoided, we're sure that some of our ships can maneuver beyond the protective screens."

"Mighty hard to avoid particle beams, maneuvering in slow motion," someone called out from the floor.

"I expect that's why the rest of us'll be speeding our tails off," someone else answered.

"Precisely right," said Dr. Epsleigh. "The machine won't anticipate seeming irrationality."

"So you think."

"So we think." The uproar threatened to drown out the administrator.

"And then the 'Reen will claw the boojum to death?" someone apparently said jokingly, but too loud.

"In a manner of speaking," Dr. Epsleigh said.

Holt translated that for PereSnik't's benefit. MussGray overheard and both 'Reen growled in amusement.

Dr. Epsleigh shook her head in exasperation and asked Holt to explain the Calling again.

"I still don't think I believe in all that occult crap," a pilot called out.

"Neither do I think," Holt said, "that the 'Reen believe simple light can actually be cohered into a laser."

"But that's different."

The room's noise level got louder again.

Twilight had begun to fuzz into actual night.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the briefing hall, Holt held up a meter-square sheet of shining alloy so that all could see. A grid of silver lines had been etched, then painted in almost a cloisonné effect. Regular clusters of angular symbols cross-connected the lines. The panel could equally have represented an electronic map or a jewelry design. It was an elaborate and stylized pattern.

"The apprentice MussGray created this," said Holt, "under the direction of the shaman, PereSnik't. It will focus the Calling."

"This is the brain of the boojum," Dr. Epsleigh said.

PereSnik't rumbled something.

"The heart," Holt translated. "Energy. The electrical field."

"The design may not be identical to the primary components in that machine up there," said the administrator, "but it's as close as we can come by guess and extrapolation after ransacking the historical computer memories. When we were part of the rest of human civilization, our ancestors helped dissect some of the boojums. We're hoping that logic circuitry is logic circuitry, even allowing for refinement."

The room fell silent.

"Hey," said Amaranth, voice loud and firm, "I'll give it a shot." His lips spread in a grin, revealing broad, white, gleaming teeth.

The 'Reen muttered approvingly as Holt translated.

"We've placed identical copies of the focus pattern in each ship carrying a 'Reen. To help coordinate the plan, our friends will have their own ship's-link channel." Dr. Epsleigh turned on the chair and looked down at Holt. "You're going to be a busy young man. I understand PereSnik't will ride with no one else."

"He is my father," said Holt. "I am his son."

"Will you be able to handle the translating as well?"

"No one else can." Holt's voice was not so much resigned as it was simply matter-of-fact.

PereSnik't said something. Dr. Epsleigh looked at Holt questioningly; the young man had already growled a brief answer. "He wanted to know if it were the chanting time yet. I told him no. The prey is still too distant."

In the forefront of the pilots, Amaranth restlessly shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "Let's get on with it," he said. "It's getting late and we're all getting curious whether we'll live or die."

That triggered smiles and nods from those around him.

Dr. Epsleigh shrugged. "You've heard what I have to say about tactics. Just do what's necessary to get the 'Reen as close to the machine's surface as possible."

Anything else seemed anticlimactic. Holt led the 'Reen out toward the ships. Tanzin followed with the pilots. They mixed at the doors of the hall. The neat division along species lines no longer seemed as clearcut as at the beginning of the day.

Dr. Epsleigh lingered, waiting by a door. Morgan came up to her. "Sympathetic magic and PK indeed," the administrator said. "Should I have said good luck? Godspeed? I might as well simply admit I *am* sending you all out with thimbles and forks and hope."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Morgan squeezed her hand. "You may be surprised by who all come back." Silently, behind her reassuring smile, she thought, I know *I* will be.

Together they walked toward the field and the ships. The dying sunset looked like blood streaking the sky.

The machine did not overtly react when it detected movement in the distant fleet of fighters. Other craft were rising from the planetary surface and joining the group. The boojum's sensory systems registered each increment of numbers, every measure of expended energy.

The fighters began to disperse toward the machine in no particularly discernible formation. The boojum searched for patterns and found none.

Then the machine completed another in its infinite series of weapons system status checks.

The ships in the approaching swarm flared energy.

Everything seemed to be fine. The oblivion within the machine waited to be defined and fulfilled.

Like silver shoals of fish they rose up, the fighter formations rising from Almira's surface. Throttles open, the fighters accelerated. Superheated steam plumes whirled back from the craft, propelling them into an ever blacker sky where the stars had begun to glitter.

The stage, thought Dr. Epsleigh, watching from her tower window in the Wolverton terminal, is set. The massed scream of the rockets deafened her.

She realized the fingers of her right hand were curled into a fist, and that fist was upraised. Get the bastard!

SHIP'S LINK
CHANNEL CHECKS

Wolverton Control/All Ships: "The Princess Elect says 'Good luck' and bring back a chunk of the boojum for the palace garden."

Amaranth/Wolverton Control: "Stuff that! We're gonna bring back enough scrap so the palace gardeners can make a whole public gazebo."

Bogdan/Wolverton Control: "I like the sound of 'gazebo.' Can we perhaps code the machine that instead of 'boojum'?"

Wolverton Control/Bogdan: "Sorry, fellow. Too late. Boojum, it is."

Anonymous/All Ships: "Bloody hell. Death be what it is."

Holt/'Reen Channel: *Our Hair-like-Morgan-elected-leader-serving-from-the-ground tells you all 'Good fortune and success in the hunt.'*

PereSnik't/'Reen Channel: *Could not your leader/shaman/provider have initiated so enlightened a sentiment a bit earlier than tonight? As perhaps her forebears could have three or four hundred world journeys ago?*

Various/'Reen Channel: *amusement*

Holt/'Reen Channel: *There were many sad winters . . . *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PereSnik't/'Reen Channel: *Sad winters . . . ?! Skelk droppings, son. What we do now is a perversion of the Calling that gives me dismay. This is not food-gathering.*

Holt/'Reen Channel: *It is a greater good.*

PereSnik't/'Reen Channel: *My unthought-out comment is unsuitable for either furred ears or bare.*

Various/'Reen Channel: *amusement*

Holt/'Reen Channel: *I am unthinking. Forgive me.*

PereSnik't/'Reen Channel: *Let us concentrate on our onerous task. Let us pursue it with honor.*

All/'Reen Channel: *anticipation*
hunger
exultation

Runagate/LNTCVP1-Bob: Ship, is your pilot's survivability index high?

LNTCVP1-Bob/Runagate: He has luck, skill, and courage. My level of confidence is high. Why do you inquire?

Runagate/LNTCVP1-Bob: My pilot's interest level in your pilot is increasing. Her concerns are mine as well.

LNTCVP1-Bob/Runagate: I perceive an equivalent status on the part of Holt. I hold no wish to see him injured in any way.

Runagate/LNTCVP1-Bob: Then we both must survive.

LNTCVP1-Bob/Runagate: The projections do not encourage me.

Runagate/LNTCVP1-Bob: We shall live with them.

LNTCVP1-Bob/Runagate: I will look forward to discussing these matters with you after the battle.

Runagate/LNTCVP1-Bob: Likewise. And with pleasure . . . Bob.

Morgan ordered Runagate to adjust the artificial gravity so that a satisfying, but less than debilitating, G-force would trickle through the system and settle both 'Reen passenger and the pilot snugly into their harnesses.

Takeoff acceleration hadn't seemed to bother MussGray at all. The artist had endured the climb up to the stratosphere stoically, listening to the voices on the 'Reen channel. He had not so much as shut his polished jet eyes as the ship shuddered and sang. The 'Reen hunter in him bared his teeth at the screens as they imaged the distant boojum. He unsheathed his claws.

Morgan lay cradled in her pilot's couch and exulted in the profligate power of the torch powering her ship. She restrained herself from putting Runagate into a vertical roll. Time enough soon for fancy maneuvers. But, she thought, the power, the sheer, raw force propelling her into space atop a column of incandescent vapor, was the most intoxicating feeling she had ever known.

Competing information channels buzzed and bleated within her ears: Almira and Wolverton Control, the fleet ahead, her colleagues, the 'Reen,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Runagate. Morgan had ordered her ship to monitor all links, including the 'Reen channel, and to mix whatever communications he deemed important.

"That may confuse you a bit," Runagate had said.

"I'll live with it."

For all effective densities, Runagate cleared atmosphere. Morgan ordered on the simulators. Her ears registered the distant rumble of the other fighters. The ship shuddered slightly beneath her and she heard the closer, reassuring roar of knife-edged fins slicing through vacuum.

Holt glanced at the silver-furred 'Reen bulked in the acceleration couch beside his. His adoptive father looked steadily back at him.

"The boojum is accelerating toward us," said Bob.

"Must be getting impatient."

"Perhaps merely suspicious," said the ship.

"Keep on the direct intercept." Holt sighed and said to PereSnik't, *Was it necessary for us to wrangle before everyone listening over the channel?*

PereSnikt's muzzle creased in a grin. *Are we not still speaking to the rest?*

No. For a short time we can talk in privacy.

The 'Reen paused in obvious deliberation. *My son, I now realize I haven't prodded you enough.*

Holt stared at him questioningly.

I believe I erred in turning you back quite so young to the barbarians in North Terrea.

I could not join the Calling. There was no—

PereSnik't held up a paw, the underside gleaming like well-worn polished leather. *It may be that my judgment was premature. No shame to—*

No! Holt turned away from the 'Reen.

PereSnik't shook his massive head slowly and sadly. *It will grieve me if I must conclude you are less of the People than I suspect.*

I am all too human—"what is it, Bob?" Holt answered the imperative blinking of a console tell-tale.

"Runagate messaging," said Bob. "Morgan would like to speak with you."

Holt's spreading, silly smile was indeed all too human.

Amaranth goosed his ship out of the atmosphere. It was not that he had to be the first fighter in the assault—although he wouldn't have turned the position away—but he also knew he didn't want to place anywhere back in the pack. "First in the hearts of his countrymen," he sang atonally. "First to fight their wa-*orrr*." The last note jangled dissonantly in his own ears.

Tanzin's voice crackled over the ship's link. "Perhaps you could, uh, sing, if that's the precise verb that fits, privately instead of on-channel?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She's right." Bogdan's voice.

"It's a war song," said Amaranth. "I'm building morale." He hit another, more than slightly askew, note.

Only a meter away, his 'Reen passenger growled ominously.

Amaranth stopped singing. "You're a critic too, my hirsute colleague?"

Another growl, prolonged, rumbling low in the 'Reen's throat.

"ThunderWalker, that's your name, right?" Amaranth said to the 'Reen hunter. "ThunderWalker, perhaps you'd like to join me in a duet."

The ship's link garbled and jammed as a dozen voices said the same word.

"Um, I . . . never heard anything quite like that said on a ship's link," Holt said. He wondered if the warmth showed on his face.

"And quite probably you won't again." The smile permeated Morgan's voice. "Don't worry, it wasn't public. Runagate and Bob locked in the channel."

"We had better open up that channel." It was Runagate's voice. "Things are heating up considerably with the boojum."

"Channel open," said Bob. "Good luck, everybody."

"Buy you a caf after this is over," Morgan said.

The brain of the machine juggled probabilities, determining whether it should, for the time being, ignore the first ships now violating its zone of effective weaponry, in order to lure the great mass of them into range.

SHIP'S LINK

CHANNEL CHECKS

Amaranth/All Ships: "Well, that was easy."

Holt/'Reen Channel: *Though we are in range of its talons, the prey has not sprung for the bait.*

Tanzin/All Ships: "It's got to be a trap."

LNTCVP1-Bob/Runagate: It is a trap.

PereSnik't/'Reen Channel: *Surely, then, the prey is attempting to gull us.*

Runagate/LNTCVP1-Bob: It is a trap.

Morgan/All Ships: "Okay, let's boost *hard!*"

The machine suddenly came alive, bristling missiles as though they were quills erecting on a Q-beast. The missiles flew just as its enemy shattered into a cloud of wildly varied trajectories. The boojum had three hundred and seventeen separate sentient enemies to contend with now, not to mention the thousands of semi-intelligent missiles erupting from the fighters like insects swarming from a nest.

Skeins of contending particle beams crisscrossed the sphere of defensive space, a traveling net with the machine spidered at the center. The boojum's shields and weapons phased in tandem. Incoming missiles sputtered, fused, and burned luridly. The machine had no program for es-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thetics, so it could not appreciate the beauty of nuclear flowers blooming brilliantly in the garden of the firmament.

The machine looked for patterns to form as the human ships flew in all directions. It had projected that the battle might be won in the first twenty seconds. That was now clearly impossible.

Victory was still a clear probability, but it would be neither fast nor simple.

SHIP'S LINK
CHANNEL CHECKS

Amaranth/All Ships: "We're in. Dammit, we're in!"

Tanzin/All Ships: "Take it easy. We're just fleas, and it doesn't mean spit if the dog hasn't decided to scratch yet."

Holt/'Reen Channel: *Close, we're close.*

ThunderWalker/'Reen Channel: *Good. The chant will also wipe away the noise of my pilot.*

MussGray/'Reen Channel: *At least your pilot has kept you alive.*

Holt/'Reen Channel: *We are *all* still alive.*

Tanzin/All Ships: "Look out! It's scratch—"

Morgan whirled her ship into a maneuver she could term, but never could have identified as to origin: an Immelman turn. Runagate looped around, rolled, then accelerated as a brace of boojum missiles flashed by.

The woman blinked through the array of images Runagate projected throughout the control space. In the holographic display, the lasers and particle beams were colored bright neon shades for clarity. The webwork patterns danced around the painfully slow midge that was Runagate closing on the boojum. Sparks cascaded around the miniature image of the ship. Some were accelerating missiles. Some were bits of debris from the dead and dying.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

Morgan glanced at the 'Reen beside her and did a double-take. The artist MussGray had brought on board a pad Dr. Epsleigh had given him. Grumbling happily, he was staring at the screens, displays, and images, and sketching furiously.

The pilot shook her head and her mind retreated to speed. She slammed Runagate into a full-ahead feint at the growing mass of the boojum.

PereSnik't grunted as the restraining straps dug into his thick shoulders. Bob rolled into a hard zig-zag, and Holt prayed the AG would stand up. It if didn't, the inside of the cockpit would look like it had been spread with berry jam.

"You're within the parameters you requested," said Bob. "Good luck."

Holt scanned the instruments, glanced at the chunk of machine balefully occluding his main screen. No casualties among the 'Reen ships yet.

"Now!" he said into the ship's link. *Now!* he said to the 'Reen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hyo came the chorus.

He glanced aside at PereSnik't. The 'Reen shaman held tight to the alloy effigy. Fur glittered, reflected in the stylized circuitry. Holt wanted to touch his father a final time, but he didn't want to alter PereSnik't's concentration.

The 'Reen reached over and clasped Holt's upper arm. *Remember* said PereSnik't. *You are as much of me as of them.*

Holt smiled.

PereSnik't began to chant. His voice rumbled as the others picked up the resonance.

You are near

The ship's skin rumpled slightly. Bob's skeleton creaked. Holt couldn't see it with his eyes, but the instruments told him a charged beam had passed within meters of Bob's wingtip.

Come to us

As we come to you

"Closer!" Holt said into the ship's link to the other pilots. "We've got to get in so close, the machine will take up the whole screen."

PereSnik't's voice filled the ship. The chant filled the space between ships.

With your pardon

We shall kill you—

Holt prayed that the other ships, the ones not carrying the 'Reen, could continue to draw the machine's attention and its firepower.

—and devour you

He realized he was chanting too. Part of his mind, his concentration, his attention, more and more of it, was drawn into the skein of power. I have to pilot, he told himself. Careful. Careful—

That we the Peoţ le

"I'm closer to that son of a bitch than you," said Morgan's voice. "Get in here, love!"

Might live

"I'm even closer," said Tanzin over the link. "Move it, Holt."

You are near

PereSnik't began the chant again. This time Holt sang with them from the beginning.

Come to us

As we come to you

The images flashed in front of his eyes. The main screen swept across what seemed an endless expanse of machine.

With your pardon

The screen was filled with the images of asymmetric metal forms. The song, the ship— Holt *meshed.*

We shall kill you—

It all worked. He could be both—

"Hey!" Amaranth's voice yelled. "We're in! Did you ever—" The transmission cut off. Vacuum filled that space.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

One of the boojum's particle beams punched through Amaranth's ship transversely. Clubbed by a weapon moving at light-speed, some things just were there, and then they were *not*.

The components of the ship's brain instantly stressed to destruction under the energy over-load and flared into darkness. The ship died of a thousand electronic aneurisms.

Passing through the cockpit, the beam did far more immediate damage to Amaranth than to ThunderWalker.

As the ship twisted sickeningly and began to break up, Amaranth could look down and see little where his chest had been. The scarlet spray beginning to cloud his eyes told him the AG was going wonky.

He knew it should hurt, but it didn't. Shock. It wouldn't. No time.

Amaranth saw a field of spring flowers, all red and gold and vibrant, in a meadow at the foot of the Shraketooths. He died before the season changed.

The particle beam had barely grazed ThunderWalker. That was sufficient to vaporize the 'Reen's shoulder.

We shall kill you—

The chant still reverberated inside ThunderWalker's head. And continued for the hunter.

—and devour you

The ship split into ragged sections. The last air was expelled from the cockpit, ripping from ThunderWalker's lungs. Still held back by the elastic restraints, the 'Reen glared out at the machine that filled his sky.

That we the People

The 'Reen hunter was dying in a sea of debris. He reached and grabbed with his remaining paw. Claws tightened around something substantial and silky—the wrist of his severed arm.

He grinned out at the prey filling his eyes and mind, feeling the chant rise to its climax.

Might live

Expending the last of his fury, ThunderWalker whirled the orphaned limb around his head and then hurled it directly into the face of his prey.

He could do no more.

The smallest segment of the boojum's defensive brain detected the strange object moving toward it from the destroyed ship. Circuits reacted. A beam licked out and turned the arm into a dissipating trace of ionized gasses.

The action was the result of a reasonable judgment on the part of the machine. Had the arm not been there to draw fire, the boojum would have selected another target . . .

Bob flashed across the boojum's surface.

Holt looked at PereSnik't and said, *Now!*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The 'Reen shaman felt the pattern of the magic that had just been worked. This prey was no different from a skelk—just larger and inedible.

The People repeated the sum of the chant.

We shall kill you

And devour you

PereSnik't focused and guided the dispassionate *grasp* out and into the prey. He soared along the guideways and glowing paths of the boojum's mighty heart.

It was too much energy even to imagine. But not so much he couldn't interrupt it. PereSnik't touched the true heart of the machine.

That we the People

One millisecond the electrons spun and flowed in streams; the next, the web of energy surged, staggered, choked—

Might live

—and died. Struck through its heart, the great, dead machine hurtled along its course.

Bob abrubtly angled to avoid a desultory defensive missile.

The machine was an inert body in the center of a cloud of angry wasps.

Holt looked at PereSnik't and the 'Reen nodded.

It is done he said into the 'Reen Channel. Holt repeated that in Anglish for the other pilots.

"Amaranth . . . " said Bogdan mournfully.

"We'll count the dead later," said Morgan. Her voice was sober. "The machine—are you sure it's finished?"

PereSnik't growled softly.

"It is dead," Holt said.

"Now to dispose of it," said one of the link voices.

"Into the sun?" The voice was Bogdan's.

"It will probably go for salvage," said Tanzin. "Drawn, quartered, and dismantled. Where did you think our bonuses were going to come from?"

The link settled down to routine traffic as pilots began to tally the casualties.

Morgan's voice came on the channel. "Holt? When we get back to Almira with the 'Reen . . . . I don't think things are going to be the same." Holt knew exactly what she meant. Then Morgan said, "Don't forget the cup of caf. I want to see you."

"I want to see you too," said Holt.

Dr. Epsleigh came on the general channel and relayed thanks and congratulations from the PM and the Princess Elect. She tried to say all the right things.

"What about that boojum?" said Bogdan. "Once we take it apart, can we figure out where it came from?"

The administrator on Almira admitted that was possible.

"And then follow the trail back and blow hell out of those machines, now that we have our secret weapon?"

Dr. Epsleigh laughed. "Maybe we will, and maybe we won't."

"We will," said Bogdan.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But Holt, translating for the 'Reen channel, wasn't so sure.
Beside him, PereSnik't grunted in agreement.

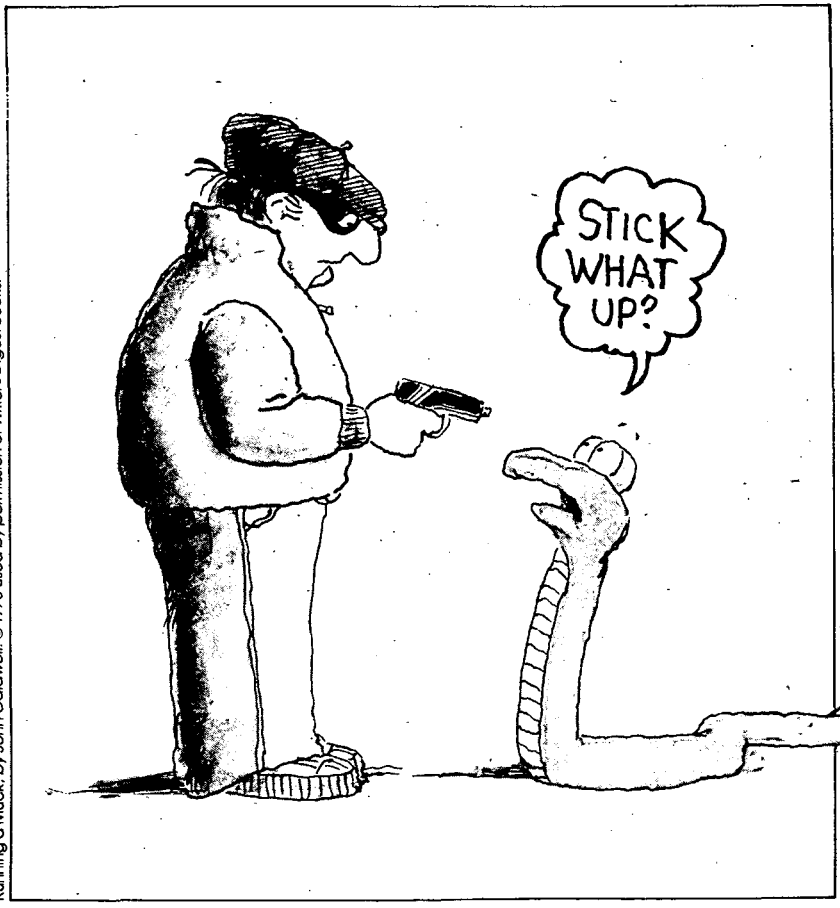
Listen now.

I have recounted to you the truth. It was the time of rejoining comradeship with "Holt," as the Other People called him, and the beginning of my learning strange and sometimes wonderful new ways.

Young, young and eager I was in that battle, riding with the woman Kai-Anila, smelling her bravery and her spirit, and attempting to lend my own poor effort.

Now I shall pause for both breath and refreshment.

Just remember, my cubs, my children, my future, that this is the rightful tale of how we at last began to gain our freedom. ●



Running a Muck, by John Caldwell. © 1978 used by permission of Writer's Digest Books.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DASHING THROUGH THE SNOW

by Isaac Asimov

Here's another delightful tale about those good Samaritans, George and Azazel, who will stop at nothing to help out a friend.

art: Hank Jankus

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

George and I were sitting at the window of La Boheme, a French restaurant he patronized now and then at my expense, and I said, "It will probably snow."

That was not a great contribution to the world's store of knowledge. It had been dark and lowering all day, the temperature was in the teens, and the weatherman had predicted snow. Still, it hurt my feelings to have George ignore the remark entirely.

He said, "Now consider my friend, Septimus Johnson."

"Why?" I said. "What has he to do with the fact that it will probably snow?"

"A natural progression of ideas," said George, severely. "That is a process you must have heard others mention, even if you have never experienced it yourself."

My friend, Septimus [said George] was a ferocious young man, with a face permanently creased into a scowl and biceps permanently swollen into bulges. He was the seventh child in his family, hence his name. He had a younger brother, named Octavius, and a younger sister named Nina.

I don't know how far the progression went, but I believe it was the crowded condition of his youthful days that made him strangely enamored of silence and solitude in his later years.

Once he matured, and achieved a certain success with his novels (like you, old fellow, except that the critics say rather flattering things about *his* work on occasion), he found himself with enough money to pamper his perversion. In short, he bought an isolated house on a forgotten piece of territory in upstate New York and retired there for longer or shorter periods in order to write further novels. It was not terribly far from civilization, but as far as the eye could see, at least, it seemed untamed wilderness.

I think I was the only person he ever voluntarily invited to stay with him at his country place. I assume he found himself attracted by the calm dignity of my demeanor and the fascination and variety of my conversation. At least, he never explained the source of attraction in so many words, but it can scarcely have been anything else.

One had to be careful with him, of course. Anyone who has ever felt the friendly clap on the back that is Septimus Johnson's favorite mode of greeting knows what it is to have a cracked vertebra. Still, his casual exertion of force came in handy at our first meeting.

I had been beset by a dozen or two hoodlums, who were misled by my upper-class carriage and appearance into assuming I carried untold wealth in cash and jewels on my person. I defended myself furiously for, as it happened, I did not have a penny on me that day, and I knew that the hoodlums, once they found this out, would, in their very natural disappointment, use me with the utmost barbarity.

It was at this point that Septimus appeared, lost in thought over something he was writing. The horde of wretches were in his way and, since

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he was too wrapped in thought to consider walking in anything but a straight line, he tossed them absently to one side or the other in twos and threes. He happened to come upon me at the bottom of the pile just as light dawned and he saw a way out of his literary dilemma, whatever it was. Feeling me to be a good luck charm, he invited me to dinner. Feeling dinner at another's expense to be an even better luck charm, I accepted.

By the time dinner was over, I had established the kind of ascendancy over him that led to my being invited to his country place. Such invitations were repeated frequently. As he said at one time, being with me was as close to being alone as possible and, considering how he loved solitude, that was quite obviously a great compliment.

At first, I expected a hovel, but I was quite wrong. Septimus had clearly done well with his novels and he had spared no expense. (I know it is rather unkind to speak of successful novels in your presence, old man, but I am, as always, wedded to the facts.)

The house, in fact, although isolated to the point of keeping me in a permanent state of horripilation, was thoroughly electrified, with an oil-fired generator in the basement and solar panels on the roof. We ate well and he had a magnificent wine cellar. We lived in total luxury, something to which I have always been able to adapt myself with astonishing ease, considering my lack of practice.

To be sure, it was impossible to avoid looking out the windows altogether and the total lack of scenery was remarkably depressing. There were, if you can credit it, hills and fields, and a small lake, and incredible quantities of vegetation of a bilious green—but not a sign of human habitation, of highways, or of anything else worth looking at—not as much as a line of telephone poles.

Once, after a good meal and good wine, Septimus said expansively, "George, I find it pleasant to have you here. After listening to you, I find it such a relief to turn to my word-processor that my writing has improved substantially. Do feel free to come here at any time. Here," he waved his hand about, "you can escape from all your cares and all the annoyances that may be hounding you. And when I am at work at my word-processor, you have free access to my books, to the television set, to the refrigerator and—I believe you know the location of the wine cellar."

As it happened, I did. I had even drawn a little map of guidance for myself, with a large X at the site of the wine cellar and several alternate routes carefully plotted out.

"The only thing is," said Septimus, "this refuge from worldly woe is closed from 1 December to 31 March. I cannot offer you my hospitality then. I must remain in my town home."

I was rather dashed at this. Snow-time was woe-time for me. After all, my dear fellow, it is in winter that my creditors are most pressing. These grasping people who, as everyone knows, are wealthy enough to be able to ignore the few paltry pennies I may owe them, seem to gain a kind of special delight at the thought that I might be thrown out into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

snow. It inspires them to new feats of wolfish greed so that it was then above all I would have welcomed refuge.

I said, "Why not use it in winter, Septimus? With a roaring fire in this magnificent fireplace ably abetting your equally magnificent central heating system, you can laugh at the cold of Antarctica."

"So I could," said Septimus, "but it seems that each winter howling devils of blizzards converge here and dump snow on this demi-paradise of mine. This house, lost in the solitude I adore, is then cut off from the outside world."

"The world is well-lost," I pointed out.

"You are perfectly right," said Septimus. "And yet my supplies come from the outside world—food, drink, fuel, laundry. It is humiliating, but true, that I cannot actually survive without the outside world—at least, I couldn't live the kind of sybaritic life that any decent human being would want to live."

I said, "You know, Septimus, it may be that I can think of a way out of this."

"Think away," he said, "but you won't succeed. Still, this home is yours eight months of the year, or at least whenever I am here during those eight months."

It was true, but how can a reasonable man settle for eight months when twelve months exist? That evening I called up Azazel.

I don't think you know about Azazel. He is an extraterrestrial being about two centimetres high who possesses extraordinary technological power which he is glad to exhibit because back on his home planet, he is not very highly thought of. Consequently—

Oh, you *have* heard of him? Well, really, old fellow, how can I tell you this story in reasoned manner if you feel called upon to insert your own views continually. You don't seem to realize that the art of the true conversationalist consists of being completely attentive, and of refraining from interruption on such specious excuses as that of having heard it all before. At any rate—

Azazel was, as always, furious at being called up. Apparently, he was engaged in what he called a solemn religious observance. I held my own temper with difficulty. He is always involved in something he imagines to be important and never seems to stop to consider that when I call him up, I am invariably involved in something that *is* important.

I waited calmly till his twittering sputters died out and then I explained the situation.

He listened with a scowl on his tiny face and said, at last, "What is snow?"

I sighed and explained.

"You mean solidified water falls from the sky here? Chunks of solidified water? And life survives?"

I didn't bother to mention hail, but said, "It falls as soft, downy flakes, Mighty One." (It always soothed him, you see, to call him foolish names.) "It is inconvenient, however, when it falls to excess."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Azazel said, "If you are going to ask me to rearrange the weather pattern on this planet, then I refuse with considerable fervor. That would come under the heading of planet-tampering which is against the ethics of my highly ethical people. I would not dream of being unethical, especially since if I were caught at it, I would be fed to the dread Lamell Bird, a most filthy creature with dreadful table manners. I would hate to tell you what he'd mix me with."

"I wouldn't dream of having you planet-tamper, Sublime One. I would like to ask something much simpler. You see, snow, when it falls, is so soft and downy, that it will not support the weight of a human being."

"It is your fault for being so massive," said Azazel, scornfully.

"No doubt," I said, "but this mass makes the going difficult. I would like to make my friend less heavy when he is on snow."

It was hard for me to hold Azazel's attention. He kept saying, in a revolted manner, "Solidified water—all over—burying the land." He shook his head as though unable to grasp the concept.

"Can you make my friend less heavy?" I asked, pounding away at what was, after all, a very simple point.

"Of course," said Azazel, indignantly. "All it requires is the application of the anti-gravity principle, activated by the water molecule under appropriate conditions. It isn't easy, but it can be done."

"Wait," I said uneasily, thinking of the dangers of inflexibility. "It would be wise to place the anti-gravitational intensity under my friend's control. He might find it convenient to flounder on occasion."

"Fit it to your crude autonomic system? Really! You know no limits to your effrontery."

"I only ask," I said, "because it's you. I would know better than to ask this of any other of your planetary ruling species."

This diplomatic untruth had its expected effect. Azazel expanded his chest by two full millimetres and, in a lordly, counter-tenor squeak, said, "It shall be done."

I supposed Septimus gained the ability at that moment, but I couldn't be sure. It was August at the time and there was no snow-cover with which to experiment—nor was I in the mood for a quick trip to Antarctica, Patagonia, or even Greenland in a search for experimental material.

Nor was there any point in explaining the situation to Septimus without snow for demonstration. He would not have believed me. He might even have come to the ridiculous conclusion that I—*I*—had been drinking.

But the Fates were kind. I was at Septimus's country home in latter November, in what he called his farewell stay for the season, and there was a copious fall of snow—unusually heavy for the month.

Septimus chafed loudly and proclaimed war on the Universe for not having spared him this vile insult.

But it was heaven to me—and to him, did he but know. I said, "Fear not, Septimus. Now is the time for you to find out that snow has no terrors for you." And I explained the situation in ample detail.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I suppose it was to be expected that his first reaction would be one of ribald disbelief, but he made certain totally unnecessary animadversions on the state of my mental health.

However, I had had months to work out my strategy. I said, "You may have wondered, Septimus, how I earn my living. You will not be surprised at my reticence when I tell you that I am the key figure in a government research program on anti-gravity. I can say no more except that you are an invaluable experiment and will greatly advance the program. This has important national-security implications."

He stared at me in wide-eyed amazement as I softly hummed a few bars of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Would I palter with the truth?" I asked in my turn. Then, risking the natural rejoinder, I said, "Would the CIA?"

He swallowed it, overcome by the aura of simple veracity that pervades all my statements.

He said, "What am I supposed to do?"

I said, "There's only six inches of snow on the ground. Imagine yourself to be weighing nothing and step out on it."

"I just have to *imagine* it?"

"That's the way it works."

"I'll get my feet wet."

I said, sarcastically, "Put on your hipboots, then."

He hesitated and then actually got out his hipboots and struggled into them. This open mark of lack of faith in my statements hurt me deeply. In addition, he put on a furry overcoat and an even furrier hat.

"If you're ready—" I said, coldly.

"I'm not," he said.

I opened the door and he stepped out. There was no snow on the covered veranda, but as soon as he placed his feet on the steps, they seemed to slide out from under him. He grabbed the balustrade with a desperate grip.

He had somehow reached the bottom of the short flight of steps, and he tried to push himself upright. It didn't work; at least not in the way he intended. He went sliding along for a few feet, arms flailing, and then his feet went up in the air. He came down on his back and continued to slide until he passed a young tree and wrapped an arm around the trunk. He slid around it three or four times and came to a halt.

"What kind of slippery snow do we have here?" he shouted in a voice that trembled with indignation.

I must admit that despite my faith in Azazel, I found myself staring in surprise. He had left no footprints and his sliding body had made no furrow in the snow.

I said, "You don't weigh anything on the snow."

"Lunatic," he said.

I said, "Look at the snow. You've left no marks."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He stared, then made a few cursory remarks of the type that in past years used to be referred to as unprintable.

"And," I went on, "friction depends in part on the pressure between a sliding body and what it slides upon. The lower the pressure, the less the friction. You weigh nothing, so your pressure on the snow is zero, the friction is zero, and you therefore slide on snow as though it were the smoothest ice."

"What am I suppose to do then? I can't have my feet slide out on me like that."

"It doesn't hurt, does it? If you don't weigh anything, and you land on your back, it doesn't hurt."

"Even so. Not being hurt is insufficient excuse for spending my life on my back in the snow."

"Come, Septimus, think yourself heavy again and then get up."

He scowled in his usual fashion and said, "Just think myself heavy, eh?" But he did and got clumsily to his feet.

He stood inches deep in it now and when he tried, cautiously, to walk, he had no more trouble than one usually does in snow.

"How do you do it, George?" he said, with much more respect in his voice than I usually managed to elicit. "I wouldn't have thought you were such a scientist."

"The CIA forces me to mask my keen scientific know-how," I explained. "Now imagine yourself lighter little by little, and walk as you do it. You'll leave shallower and shallower tracks and the snow will grow more and more slippery. Stop when you feel it becoming dangerously slippery."

He did as he was told for we scientists have a strong intellectual grip over lesser mortals. "Now," I said, "try sliding around. When you want to stop, just make yourself heavier—and do it gradually or you'll go over on your nose."

He caught the knack immediately, being the athletic type. He told me once he could do anything in the way of sport but swim. His father, when he was a boy of three, had tossed him into the water in a kindly attempt to get him to swim without the tedious necessity of instruction, and the young Septimus had required ten minutes of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as a result. He said it had left him with a lifetime fear of water and an aversion to snow as well. "Snow is just solid water," he said, exactly as Azazel would have.

The aversion to snow failed to make itself evident under the new conditions, however. He began sliding about with an ear splitting "Whee!," and would, from time to time, make himself heavier as he turned, casting up a thick spray of snow and coming to a halt.

He said, "Wait!," dashed into the house and emerged—if you will believe it—with ice-skates affixed to boots.

"I learned how to skate on a lake once," he explained, as he began to put them on, "but I never enjoyed it. I was always afraid the ice would break. Now I can skate on land without danger."

"But remember," I said anxiously, "it only works above the H_2O mol-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ecule. If you come to a bare patch of earth, or exposed pavement, your lightness will vanish instantly. You'll hurt yourself."

"Don't worry," he said, getting to his feet, and taking off. I watched him speed along for at least half a mile over the frozen wastes of his acreage and to my ears there came the distant bellow of: "Dashing through the snow/in a one-horse open sleigh—"

Septimus, you must understand, guesses at the pitch of each note, and always guesses wrong. I put my hands over my ears.

There followed what I truly believe was the happiest winter of my life. All winter long I was snug and warm in the house, eating and drinking like a king, reading improving books in which I tried to outguess the author and identify the murderer, and speculating with grim delight on the frustrations of my creditors back in the city.

Through the window, I could watch Septimus in his endless skating over the snow. He said it made him feel like a bird and gave him a three-dimensional delight he had never known. —Well, to each his own.

I did warn him he must not let himself be seen. "It would endanger me," I said, "for the CIA would not approve this private experimentation—not that I care about my personal danger for, to a person like myself, science comes above all. However, if you were ever seen skimming over snow as you do, you would become an object of curiosity and dozens of newspapermen would swarm over you. The CIA would hear of it and you would have to undergo experimentation with hundreds of scientists and military men poking at you. You would never be alone for a minute. You would become a national treasure and you would be at all times within reach of thousands of people concerned over you."

Septimus shuddered strongly at the prospect as I knew an isolation-lover would have to. Then he said, "But how will I get supplies when I am snowed in? That was the whole purpose of this experiment."

I said, "I'm sure the trucks will almost always be able to make their way up the roads and you can store up enough to tide you over those times when they can't. If you *do* need something on an emergency basis when you are truly snowed in, you can skim as close to town as you dare, making sure no one sees you—there'll be very few people in the open at such times anyway, possibly no one—then restore your weight, tramp the last few hundred feet, and look worn out. Pick up what you need, tramp away a few hundred feet, and take off again. See?"

Actually, it was never necessary to do that even once during that winter; I knew all along that he had exaggerated the snow danger. And no one ever saw him during his skimming, either.

Septimus couldn't get enough. You should have seen his face when snow held off for more than a week or the temperature rose above freezing. You can't imagine how he feared for the safety of the snow cover.

What a marvelous winter! What a tragedy that it was the only one!

What happened? I'll tell you what happened. You remember what

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Romeo said just before he slipped the knife into Juliet? You probably don't, so I'll tell you. He said, "Let a woman in your life and your serenity is through."

The following fall, Septimus met a woman—Mercedes Gumm. He had met women before; he was no anchorite; but they had never meant much to him. A short period of socialization—romance—ardor—and then he forgot them, and they him. No harm in it. After all, I myself have been ferociously pursued by many young women and I never found harm in it at all, even though they frequently cornered me and forced me to—but I drift away from the story.

Septimus came to me in a very cast down mood. "I love her, George," he said. "I am driven to distraction by her. She is the very lodestone of my existence."

"Very pretty," I said. "You have my permission to carry on with her for a while."

"Thanks, George," said Septimus, gloomily. "Now what I need is *her* approval. I don't know why it should be, but she doesn't seem to take to me much."

"Odd," I said, "you are usually quite successful with women. You are after all, rich, muscular, and not uglier than most."

"I think it's the muscular part," said Septimus. "She thinks I'm an oaf."

I had to admire Miss Gumm's penetration. Septimus, to put it as kindly as possible, *was* an oaf. I thought it best, however, as I imagined his biceps writhing under his jacket sleeves, not to mention my estimate of the situation.

He said, "She says she doesn't admire the physical in men. She wants someone thoughtful, intellectual, deeply rational, philosophical, and a whole bucketful of adjectives like those. She says I'm not any of these things."

"Have you told her you're a novelist?"

"Of course, I've told her that. And she's read a couple of novels of mine, too. But you know, George, they tend to be about football players and she says she found that revolting."

"I take it she's not the athletic type."

"Certainly not. She swims," and he made a face, probably remembering being mouth-to-mouth resuscitated at the tender age of three, "but that doesn't help."

"In that case," I said, consolingly, "forget her, Septimus. Women are easy to come by. As one leaves, another arrives. There are many fish in the sea and birds in the air. One woman or another, it makes no difference."

I would have continued indefinitely, but he seemed to grow oddly restless as he listened and one doesn't care to make an oaf restless.

Septimus said, "George, you offend me deeply with those sentiments. Mercedes is the only girl in the world for me. I couldn't live without her. She is inseparably bonded to the core of my being. She is the very breath of my lungs, the beat of my heart, the vision of my eyes. She—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He *did* continue indefinitely, and it didn't seem to bother him in the least, that he was offending *me* deeply with those sentiments.

He said, "So I see no way out but of insisting on marriage."

The words were the knell of doom. I knew exactly what that the result would be. As soon as they were married, that would mean the end of my paradise. I don't know why it is, but if there is one thing that new wives insist upon, it is that bachelor friends must go. I would never be invited to Septimus's country place again.

"You can't do that," I said, in alarm.

"Oh, I admit it seems hard, but I think I can do it. I have worked out a plan. Mercedes may think I'm an oaf, but I'm not entirely unintellectual. I will invite her to my country place at the beginning of winter. There, in the quiet and peace of my Eden, she will feel her being expand and she will come to realize the true beauty of my soul."

That, I thought, was expecting far too much even of Eden, but what I said was, "You're not planning to show her how you can skim over the snow, are you?"

"No, no," he said. "Not until we're married."

"Even then—"

"Nonsense, George," said Septimus, censoriously, "A wife is a husband's second self. A wife can be trusted with the dearest secrets of one's soul. A wife—"

Again, he went on indefinitely, and all I could do was say, weakly, "The CIA won't like it."

His brief comment on the CIA was one with which the Soviets would heartily have agreed. Cuba and Nicaragua as well.

"Somehow I'll persuade her to come with me at the beginning of December," he said. "I trust you will understand, George, if we two plan to be alone. I know you wouldn't dream of interfering with the romantic possibilities that would arise between Mercedes and myself in the peaceful solitude of nature. We would surely be drawn together by the magnetism of silence and slow time."

I recognized the quotation, of course. It was what Macbeth said just before he slipped the knife into Duncan, but I merely stared at Septimus in a cold and dignified way. A month later, then, Miss Gumm *did* go to Septimus's country place and I did not.

What happened at the country place, I did not witness. I know it only through the spoken testimony of Septimus so I cannot vouch for all the details.

Miss Gumm *was* a swimmer, but Septimus, feeling an unconquerable aversion to that particular hobby, asked no questions about it. Nor did Miss Gumm apparently feel it necessary to force detail on an unquestioning oaf. For that reason, Septimus never found out that Miss Gumm was one of those madwomen who enjoyed donning a bathing suit in the depth of winter, breaking the ice in the lake and dropping into the freezing water for a healthful, invigorating swim.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It followed that one bright and frosty morning, while Septimus was snoring in oafish slumber, Miss Gumm arose, put on her bathing suit, terry-cloth cloak, and sneakers, and went along the snow-covered path to the lake. The rim was lightly iced up but the interior was still free of cover and, removing the cloak and sneakers, she plunged into the frigid water with what must have been every evidence of enjoyment.

It was not long after that that Septimus awoke and, with a lover's fine instinct, instantly realized that his beloved Mercedes was not in the house. He went through it calling her name. Finding her clothes and other belongings in her room, he realized she had not secretly left for the city—as had been his first fearful thought. She must then be outside.

Hastily, he put boots on his bare feet and slipped his heaviest overcoat over his pajamas. He dashed outside, calling her name.

Miss Gumm heard him, of course, and waved her arms madly in his direction, shouting "Right here, Sep. Right here."

What followed next I'll tell you in Septimus's own words. He said, "To me it sounded like 'Here, help, help!' I reached the natural conclusion that my love had ventured out onto the ice in a moment of madness and had fallen in. How could it ever occur to me that she would willingly throw herself into freezing water?

"Such was my great love for her, George, that I instantly determined to dare the water which ordinarily I cravenly feared—especially ice-cold water—and to rush to her rescue. Well, perhaps not *instantly*, but, honestly, it was after not more than two minutes of thought, or three at the outside.

"Then I shouted, 'I'm coming, my own, my loved one. Keep your head above water.' and I started out. I wasn't going to *walk* there through the snow. I felt there wasn't enough time. I decreased my weight as I ran, and then took off on a magnificent slide, right across the shallow snow-cover, right across the ice that rimmed the lake, and right into the water with a horrendous splash.

"As you know I can't swim and am, indeed, deadly afraid of water. My boots and overcoat dragged me down, too, and I would certainly have drowned if Mercedes had not rescued me.

"You would think that the romance of rescuing me would have drawn us closer together, welded us as one, but—"

Septimus shook his head, and there were tears in his eyes, "It didn't work that way. She was furious. 'You oaf,' she shrieked. 'Imagine plunging into the water in your overcoat and boots and not even being able to swim. What on earth did you think you were doing? Do you know what a struggle it was to get you out of the lake? And you were in such a panic you clipped me on the jaw. You nearly knocked me out and had us *both* drown. And it still hurts.'

"She packed and left in a complete huff, and I had to remain behind with something that quickly developed into a very nasty cold, one I still haven't quite gotten over yet. I haven't seen her since then; she won't answer my letters; she won't return my phone calls. My life is over, George."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I said, "Just out of curiosity, Septimus, why *did* you throw yourself into the water? Why didn't you stand on the lakeshore, or as far out on the ice as you dared, and reach a long stick out to her or throw her a rope if you could get one."

Septimus looked aggrieved. "I didn't intend to throw myself into the water. I intended to slide along the top."

"Slide along the top? Didn't I tell you your weightlessness would only work on ice."

Septimus' look became one of ferocity. "I *thought* that was it. You said it only worked on H_2O. That includes water, doesn't it?"

He was right. H_2O sounded more scientific and I had to maintain my air of scientific genius. I said, "But I meant *solid* H_2O."

"But you didn't *say* solid H_2O," he said, as he slowly rose with what I felt to be the clear intention of dismembering me.

I didn't remain to check on the accuracy of my feeling. I have never seen him since. Nor have I ever again been to his country paradise. I believe he lives on a South Sea island now, largely, I think, because he never wants to see ice or snow again.

It's as I say, "Let a woman in your life—" though, come to think of it, it may have been Hamlet who said that just before he slipped his knife into Ophelia.

George let a large, vinous sigh bubble forth from the depths of what he considers his soul and said, "But they're closing the place and we had better leave. Have you paid the bill?"

Unfortunately, I had.

"And can you lend me a fiver, old man, to get me home?"

Even more unfortunately, I could. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LET'S EXCHANGE GIFTS THIS CHRISTMAS!

This holiday season not only will ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE answer your gift-giving problems, we'll give you a gift as well!

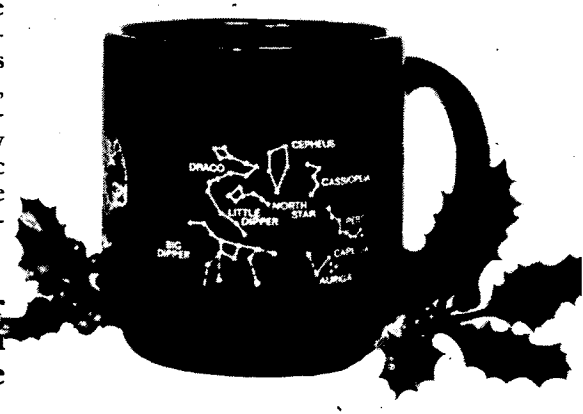
It's as simple as 1, 2, 3!

1) Make a list of all the friends you'll want to remember this holiday season.

2) Next to everyone's name write Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. You couldn't give a better gift, or one that would be more appreciated. Each issue is filled with mesmerizing tales of astounding science fiction, and is a monthly reminder of your thoughtfulness. And at our special low rates, you'll save with each gift you order. Your first subscription (either yours or a friend's) is only $15.97; the second only $12.97 and each one after that only $10.97.

3) Best of all, we won't bill you until January 1985! And, if you order three gifts you can pay in four easy installments of only $9.97 each!

Now, about our gift to you...give Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine to three or more of your friends and we'll send you, absolutely free, our limited edition custom-designed "celestial mug"—just add any hot liquid and the thermochromic effects of this mug will bring the northern constellations shining before your eyes.



It couldn't be easier to order. See our card in this issue or call toll-free 1-800-247-2160.

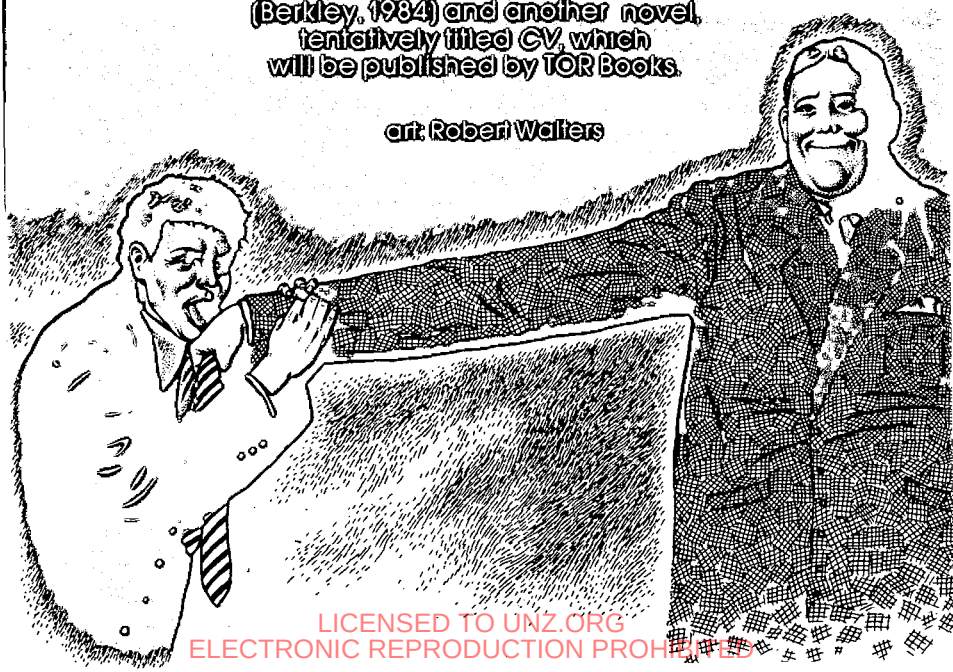
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE VERY OBJECTIONABLE MR. CLEGG

by Damon Knight

We are pleased to be publishing this humorous short story by one of the most respected figures in the field of science fiction. Mr. Knight is well known as a critic, teacher, and editor of science fiction. His most recent works include *The Man in the Tree* (Berkley, 1984) and another novel, tentatively titled *CV*, which will be published by TOR Books.

art: Robert Walters



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Lionel Clegg said good-bye politely to the stewardess when he left the airplane at O'Hare. Her bright smile slipped a little; *what an awful person how can he* said one of the cricket voices in his skull.

Mr. Clegg walked heavily up the ramp and emerged into the concourse. There was something wrong, evidently, with his appearance—his torso was too bulky, perhaps, his arms too long, his lipless mouth too wide; but it was too late to change now.

Mr. Clegg looked with interest at the candy bars displayed at the magazine stand. He bought three and ate them, wrapping and all, as he moved on. A man with a push-broom gave him a startled glance.

Mr. Clegg stopped at a wall of lockers and watched a man in a brown suit opening one: first he put in two quarters, then he opened the door and lifted in two Samsonite suitcases and a garment bag. Then he closed the door, took out the little key and put it in his pocket.

The lockers without keys, then, were those that had luggage in them. Mr. Clegg chose one and pressed the tip of his index finger to the lock. After a moment he turned his finger with a metallic sound and opened the door. There were three pieces of luggage inside. Mr. Clegg set them on the floor and opened another locker. This one contained a large soft-sided suitcase and a small train case. Mr. Clegg put the luggage from the first locker into the second locker and vice versa. He went down the row in this way, exchanging the contents of the lockers; then he sat down in a black vinyl seat with a briefcase which he had kept for himself. He watched the people going by and listened to the cricket voices.

A large man in a pinstripe suit walked up to one of the lockers and opened it with a key. He stared at the three brown suitcases inside. He tugged one of them partway out, shoved it in again and tried to take the key out of the lock. Then he closed the door and opened it again. He turned, scratching his head, and saw Mr. Clegg. "Not my luggage," he said.

"No."

"Somebody else's suitcases in there."

"Yes."

"I don't understand it."

"No."

The large man turned, opened the locker and looked in, shut it again. "Listen, will you watch this locker a minute?"

"Yes."

The man went away. When he was out of sight, Mr. Clegg got up and locked the door again, removing the key, which he ate. Then he sat down and opened the ash receptacle beside him. It was half full of cigarette butts, gray ash, crumpled papers. Mr. Clegg ate three of the cigarette butts and a chewing-gum wrapper.

Presently the large man came back with a man in a blue jacket. While they were arguing, a woman in a green dress came up, opened a nearby locker, looked at the suitcases inside, and joined the discussion. Mr. Clegg

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sat and watched until the man with the blue jacket took the people away. Then he got up and went out into the concourse.

At the United desk a tired-looking woman in a nubbly brown coat was holding a folder toward the blue-jacketed man across the counter. "But I have the ticket," she said. "I don't understand, it says right here 'Flight Seventeen.' "

"We don't show a seat for you in the computer," said the man. "If you'll just wait over there—"

Mr. Clegg stepped up and said, "Perhaps I can be of assistance, madam. What seems to be the trouble?"

She turned to him. "Oh—well— It's just that I have to get to Cleveland this afternoon, and now they say I don't have a seat on the airplane."

The blue-jacketed man had turned away to talk to a young woman, also wearing a blue jacket. "Sir," said Mr. Clegg, "may I have your attention for a moment?" The blue-jacketed man went on talking. Mr. Clegg reached over the counter with an extraordinarily long arm and took the man by the necktie. "Am I right in thinking that I have your attention now?" he asked. The man gurgled.

Mr. Clegg released him and straightened his necktie. "This lady tells me that she has a ticket on Flight Seventeen for Cleveland. Is that correct?"

The man massaged his throat. "Yes," he said. Behind him, the young woman was speaking quietly into a hand-held telephone.

"And she also tells me that you have no seat for her on the airplane."

"We're overbooked."

"Therefore you have sold her a ticket which is worthless to her?"

The man glanced at the young woman, who was putting down the phone. "We'll try to get her a seat after the other passengers have boarded."

"They're boarding *now,*" said the tired-looking woman, looking toward the end of the room.

"Now I suggest this," said Mr. Clegg. "Either you will give this lady a boarding pass, or you will be extremely sorry." He opened his jaws partway. The blue-jacketed man turned pale. He looked at the tired woman. "Give me your ticket," he said hoarsely. "Smoking or nonsmoking?"

"Nonsmoking, please. But I don't care, just so I get on that darn airplane."

The man slipped the ticket into a new folder, scrawled something on it, and handed it to the woman. "Oh, thank you," she said, and looked at Mr. Clegg. "Thank *you,* Mr.—"

"Clegg," he replied, tipping his hat. "Lionel Clegg, at your service."

As he watched her join the departing passengers, Mr. Clegg became aware that two large young men in blue uniforms had appeared, one on either side of him. "Will you come with us, please?" said one.

"Certainly. Are those revolvers you are carrying on your belts?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, sir." They began to move down the hall. "This way, please." One of the blue-uniformed men opened a door marked "Security."

"One moment." Mr. Clegg reached out and plucked the revolver from the nearest man's hip, holster and all. The other one stepped back and drew his weapon. Mr. Clegg stretched out his arm and took that one as well. He ate the two guns, one after the other. *Oh Jesus* said a cricket voice. Mr. Clegg tipped his hat again and walked away.

The cab driver turned in his seat. "Where to?"

Mr. Clegg was opening the briefcase on his lap. The driver looked unhappy when he saw the gleam of metal at the end of his finger. *Why do I get all the weird ones* said the cricket voice. Mr. Clegg took out a bundle of folded papers and sorted through them until he found a business letterhead with a Chicago address. He read it to the driver, and settled back to look through the window.

The taxi deposited him in front of a large marble-faced building. Mr. Clegg took the elevator to the tenth floor. "Yes, can I help you?" asked a young woman at a desk. She had a brown jacket and a blouse with frills all the way down the front.

"Get me the office manager," said Mr. Clegg. He strode past her down the corridor. "Sir! Sir!" she was calling after him. Mr. Clegg found himself in a maze of cubicles with transparent plastic walls. In the first empty one he came to, he sat down at the desk, pushed some papers onto the floor, and opened his briefcase. While he waited, he ate a red plastic rose and some paper clips.

A bald man with glasses came in. Mr. Clegg looked at him. "Are you the office manager?"

"Yes. I'm Ed Thorgeson, the office manager. Who—"

"Lionel Clegg. Where's the biggest office you've got?"

The cricket voice was saying *now what, did Graham send him from New York—*

"Graham sent me from New York," said Mr. Clegg. "Let's not waste time."

"Well, there's a corner office—"

"I want it ready to move into by one o'clock. Meanwhile get me the personnel files."

"The personnel files? All of them?" He swallowed. "Yes, Mr. Clegg, right away."

As the bald man turned, a red-haired young woman entered and looked at Mr. Clegg in surprise. The bald man took her by the arm and led her off.

After a few minutes a young woman in a white blouse came in with a metal cart stacked with file folders. "These are A to F, Mr. Clegg," she said. "Do you want—"

"Put the others in my new office. What's your name? How long have you worked here?"

ACCESSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My name is Edith Fellowes, Mr. Clegg. I've worked here for a year and a half."

"Okay. Now beat it."

Mr. Clegg opened the first file folder and looked at it, flipped it over and looked at the next. Every now and then he removed a folder and laid it aside.

A tall dark-haired man came in, smiling nervously. "Mr. Clegg, I'm Bill Eberhard, vice president in charge of sales. Is there anything—"

The bald man looked in behind him. "Oh, Mr. Clegg, that office is ready for you now."

"Okay. Get this junk carried in there and send me a stenographer." Mr. Clegg marched past the dark-haired man without looking at his outstretched hand, and followed the bald man to a large office with windows on two sides. The desk was large, bare and gleaming; behind it was a tall padded vinyl chair, and beside it were four more carts stacked with file folders. Mr. Clegg began going through them.

A tall blonde woman came in carrying a ring-bound notebook. "I'm Gloria Rickart, Mr. Clegg. Can I get you some coffee?"

"No. Sit down over there and shut up."

The blonde woman turned pale and sat down at the desk in the corner. The telephone rang; she picked it up. "Mr. Clegg's office." She listened a moment."Mr. Laverty would like to see you; he's our vice president in charge of marketing."

"Tell him when I want him I'll send for him." Mr. Clegg continued to go through the file folders. When he had a stack that threatened to topple over, he said to the blond woman, "Type the names on these folders, four copies."

"Yes sir." She staggered away with the folders. When she returned, Mr. Clegg had another pile ready for her.

An hour went by pleasantly. Miss Rickart laid the last of the typed lists on his desk. Mr. Clegg scanned it, and made sure the names Fellowes, Eberhard, Rickart and Laverty appeared on it. "Get me Thorgeson," he said.

When the office manager appeared, Mr. Clegg handed him one copy of the typed list. "Make out dismissal notices for these people," he said. "I want them out of here by five o'clock." He folded the other three copies and stuffed them into his pocket. He rose and walked to the door. "I'm going to lunch," he said. "Call a meeting of all heads of departments for three o'clock."

"Yes, Mr. Clegg."

There was a little knot of people in the corridor. *Firing a hundred and seventy-three people* said a cricket voice.

Around the corner from the office building, he found himself in a street of small shops. The day was turning windy and cool. A ragged man came toward him, clutching his overcoat together and weaving a little. "My good man," said Mr. Clegg, "will you kindly trade coats with me?" He took off his gray cheviot topcoat and held it out.

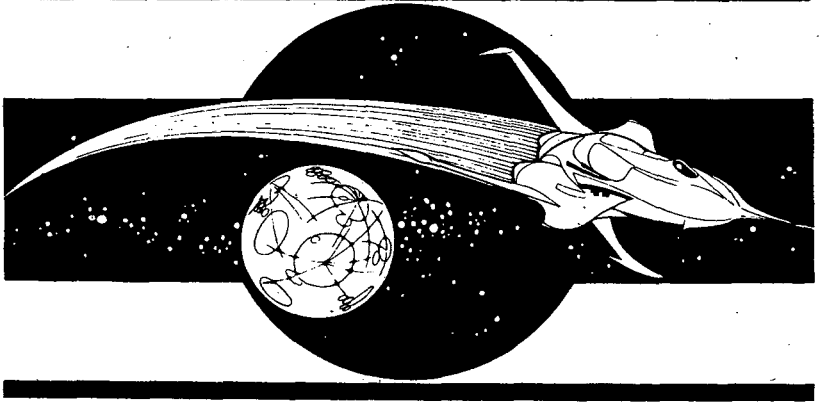
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Uh, sure," said the ragged man, whose eyes did not quite focus. He struggled out of his coat and gave it to Mr. Clegg. "Uh, thanks."

"Not at all." Mr. Clegg tipped his hat and walked on. He draped the ragged man's overcoat across an overflowing trash basket at the corner. At a florist's in the next block he bought a dozen yellow roses, which he gave to a man in a black leather jacket who was coming out of a tobacconist's. A block farther down, he took a larger paper-wrapped package away from an old man, and threw it into the middle of the street, where a taxi skidded around it.

In his cheap hotel room that night, Mr. Clegg removed his jacket and shirt, opened a large door in his chest, and took out the things he had eaten during the day: guns, paper clips, candy bars, the plastic rose. After he had dumped them in the wastebasket, he beamed a query: *Satisfactory?* The reply came after the usual delay: *Satisfactory.*

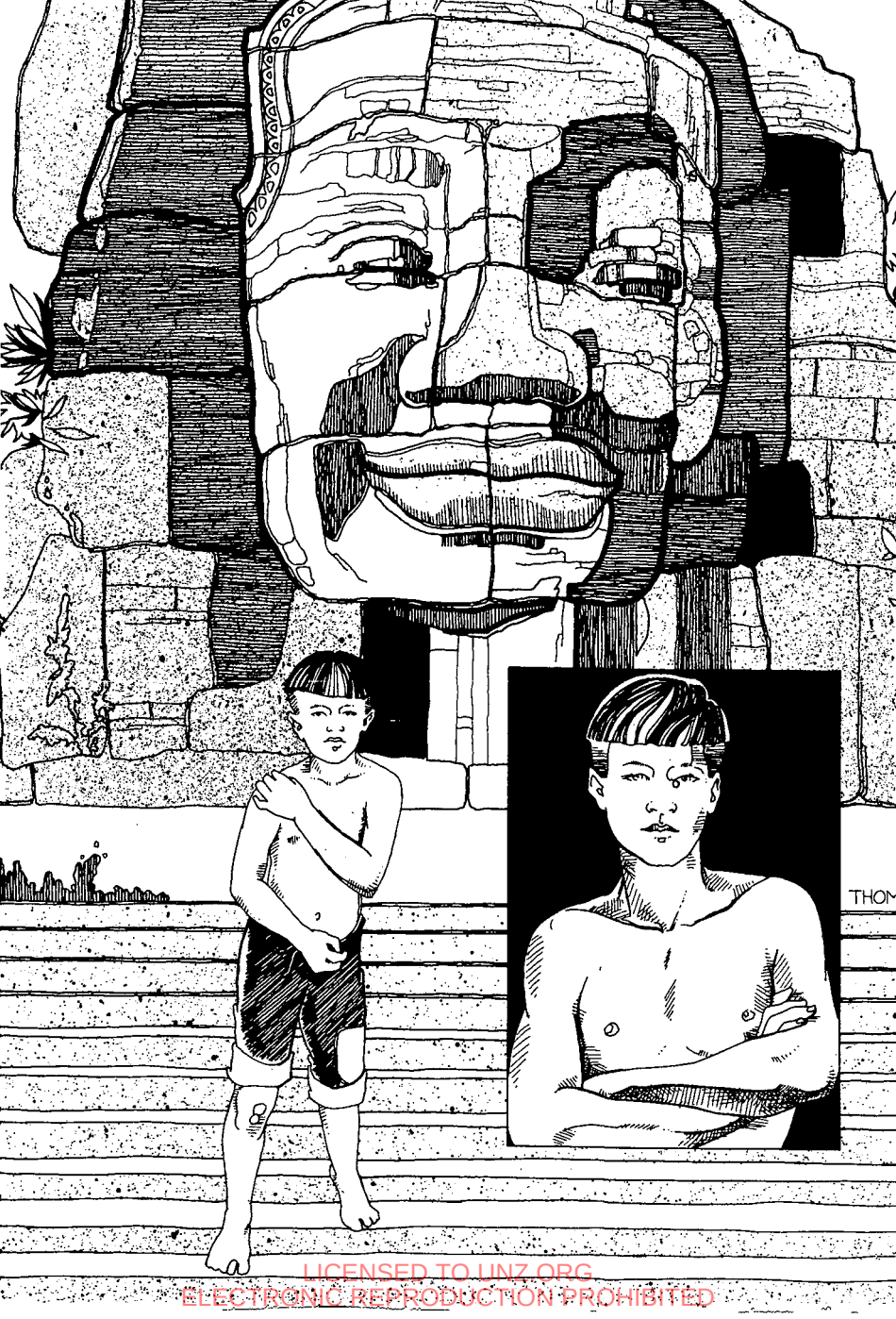
Mr. Clegg lay down carefully on the bed, which groaned under his weight but did not collapse. He turned off the bedside light, then unscrewed his head and laid it on the nightstand. The cricket voices stopped. It had been a good day. ●



NEXT ISSUE:

Start 1985 early and right with our exciting January issue. Our cover story, "The End of Life As We Know It" by Lucius Shepard, will be accompanied by beautiful cover and interior art by J.K. Potter. We'll also have stories by Frederik Pohl, Connie Willis, Barry N. Malzberg, Michael Bishop, and others. Look for it on sale December 18, 1985.

ACCESSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



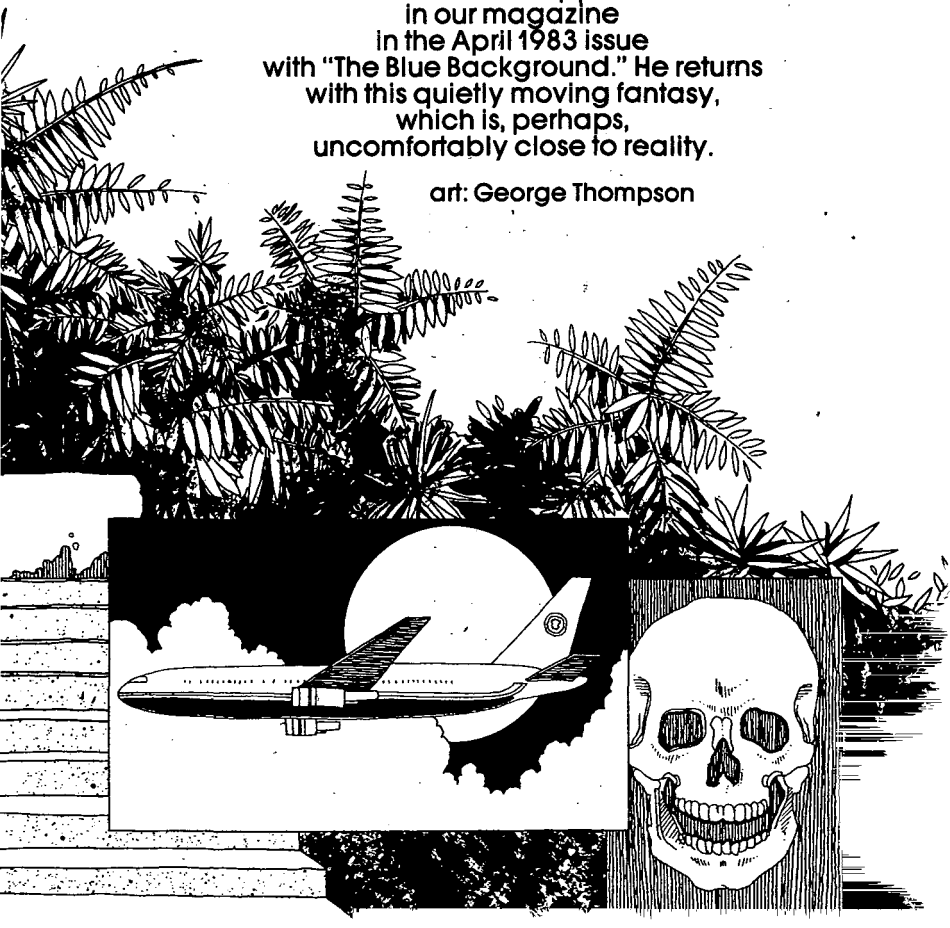
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE GODS IN FLIGHT

by Brian Aldiss

The author last appeared in our magazine in the April 1983 issue with "The Blue Background." He returns with this quietly moving fantasy, which is, perhaps, uncomfortably close to reality.

art: George Thompson



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Behind the hotel, cliffs rose sheer. The steps which had been cut into the rock long ago made their ascent easy. Kilat climbed them slowly, on hands and knees, and his small brother Dempo followed, chattering as he went.

At the top of the climb, the boys were confronted by huge stones, fancifully carved in the likenesses of human beings, water buffalo, and elephants, all squatting among the foliage crowning the island. Kilat clapped his hands with pleasure. A hornbill fixed Kilat with its pebble eyes, flapped away, and glided towards the sea. Kilat watched it till it was out of sight, pleased. The bird was popularly supposed to be a messenger from the Upper World, and was associated with the beginnings of mankind.

"That hornbill can be a sign that the world is not destroyed," Kilat told his brother. Dempo tried to climb up one of the faces, planting his bare brown feet on the lips. He still carried baby fat, but Kilat was eight and so lean that his ribs showed.

Kilat stood on the edge of the precipice and stared in a northeasterly direction across the gleaming waters. The sea looked calm from this vantage point, one of the highest on the island; silvery lanes wound across it reflecting the morning sun. Further out, a leaden haze absorbed everything.

Shielding his eyes, Kilat searched in the haze for sight of Kerintji. Generally, the peak was visible, cloud-wreathed, even when the long coast of Sumatra remained hidden. Today, nothing could be seen. Kilat loved Kerintji and thought of it as a god. Sometimes he slept up here under the stars, just to be near Kerintji.

Although he stood for a long time, Kilat saw nothing in the haze. Finally he turned away.

"We'll go down to town now," he called to Dempo. "Kerintji is angry with the behavior of men."

Still he lingered. It had always been his ambition to get on a ship or, better still, a plane, one of the big white planes which landed on the new airfield, and go north to see the world. Not just the nearby world, but that huge world of affairs where white people traveled about in their white birds as if they were gods. He had already started saving his rupiahs.

The two boys made their way back down the steps. His mother sat on the front steps of her hotel, smoking and chattering to her servants. There were no tourists, no white people—although it was the season for them to arrive—so there was no reason to work.

When Kilat was not made to do small jobs about the hotel, he sold rugs and watches down by the waterfront. Today, it was not worth the effort, but he stuffed some watches in his pocket, just in case.

"You can stay here with me," their mother told the boys. But they shook their dark heads. It was more interesting down in town, now that they were growing up. Kilat took his brother's hand to show his mother how responsible he was.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The road into town wound round the hill. Going on foot, the boys took a shorter route. They walked down flights of stone steps which, according to legend, the gods had built to allow the first man and woman to climb out of the sea. Every stone was carved; did not steps too have souls, waiting to find expression through the soles of man?

The sun was already hot, but the boys walked in the occasional shade of trees. They had a fine view of the airstrip at one point, stretched like a Band-Aid on one of the few flat areas of the whole of Sipora. All was quiet there. Heat rippled over the runway so that its white lines wriggled like the worms dogs spewed.

"Why aren't the white planes flying?" Dempo asked.

"Perhaps the gods are not coming to Sipora any more."

"You mean the devils. It's better if they don't come, Kilat. No work for you and mother, isn't that a fact?"

"It's better if they come."

"But they spoil our island. Everyone says it."

"Still it's better if they come, Dempo. I can't tell you why but it is."

He knew that it was something to do with that huge world of affairs which began over the horizon. The schoolmistress had said as much.

As they negotiated the next section of stairs, the airport was hidden behind a shoulder of rock. Butterflies sailed between Upper World and Earth. The stairs twisted and they could see the little town, with its two big new hotels which were rivals to his mother's hotel. The Tinggi Tinggi had only six wooden rooms and no air-conditioning. The new hotels were of concrete; one had twelve bedrooms and the other sixteen little bungalows in its grounds. Among the trees behind the bungalows a part of the old village was preserved; its saddle-backed longhouses stood almost on the shore among the palm trees. Their roofs were no longer of thatch but corrugated iron which shone in the sun.

"The old village is excitingly beautiful," Kilat told his brother. He kept some brochures under his mattress which he saved when his mother's tourists threw them away. One of them described the village—he had asked the schoolmistress what the English words meant—as "excitingly beautiful." It had completely changed Kilat's appreciation of the longhouses. Not that he believed them to be beautiful; he preferred the sixteen little concrete bungalows; but the words had mysteriously distanced him from what had once been familiar. In the photograph in the brochure, the longhouses on their sturdy stilt legs did look excitingly beautiful, as if they no longer formed a part of Sipora.

The steps finished where the slope begame easier. Cultivation began immediately. Water buffalo were working in the fields, together with men, women, and some children. A Chinese tea-seller walked along the top of an irrigation dike, his wares balanced at either end of a pole. Everything looked as normal, except that the tourist stalls which dotted the sides of the sandy road to town were shuttered and padlocked.

"This is where the white gods buy film for their cameras," Kilat said, indicating a stall where a Kodak sign hung. He spoke crisply, with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

assumed contempt—yet in a curious way he did feel contempt for these rich people who came for a day or two and then disappeared for ever. What were they after? They made so much noise and became angry so easily. They were always in a hurry, although they were supposed to be on a "holiday." It was beyond Kilat to understand what a "holiday" was. The elders said that the tourists from the north came to steal Sipora's happiness.

"They won't need any film now," Dempo said. "Perhaps they have taken enough pictures."

"Perhaps their own gods have stopped them flying in their planes."

They had both watched tourists photographing, jumping up and down and laughing as they watched, to see the way these lumpy people always pointed their cameras at the same things, and the most boring ones. Always the water buffalo, always the longhouses, always the tumbledown coffeeshop. Never the sixteen little concrete bungalows or the airport.

In the market square, they met other boys. Dempo played with his friends in a ditch while Kilat talked and joked with his. The weekly boat from Padang should have arrived this morning at nine, but had not done so—Kilat had looked for it from the mountainside and noted that it was missing. The world was mad. Or possible it was dead. Just as the gods had created Sipora first, perhaps they had left it till last. Everyone laughed at the idea.

Later, George strolled by, as usual wearing nothing but a pair of rolled-up jeans and a battered hat. He was German or American or something, and he lived in a cheap *penginapan* called Rokhandy's Accommodation. George was known locally as The Hippie, but Kilat always called him George. George was about as thin as Kilat.

"I'm heading for the airport, Kilowatt. Like taking my morning constitutional. Want to come along?"

"Kilowatt" was just George's joke—not a bad one either, since Kilat's name meant "lightning." Kilat always enjoyed the joke, and he started walking beside George, hands in pockets, leaving Dempo to look after himself. He took long strides, but George never moved fast. George did not even have a camera.

They skirted the shore, where the wind-surfers lay forlorn with their plastic sails on the sand. Rokhandy himself, bored with the failure of his business, was sailing out on the strait, almost to where the wall of purple cloud began. George waved, but received no response.

"Seems like the good ole Western world has finally done itself in for sure. For fifty years they been shaping up for a final shootout. There's the lore of the other West, Kilowatt, old son, the one where the cowboys ride the range. Two brave men walking down Main Street in the noonday sun, one playing Goodie, one playing Baddie. They git nearer, and they don't say a thing and they don't change their expressions. And then—bang, bang—the goddamn idiots shoot each other dead, instead of skedaddling off down a side alley, like I'd have."

"Were you a cowboy once, Georgie?" Kilat asked. The Hippie went right on with his monologue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I feel kind of bad if that's like what's happened in real life. I'd say *our* president and *their* president seen too many of them cowboy films; they finally put pride before common horse sense once too often—'n' this time all the bystanders they got themselves killed as well. Serve 'em right trusting the sheriff. So I feel kind of bad, but let me tell you, Kilowatt, old son, I also feel kind of good, because I used to warn 'em and they took not a damned bit of notice, so finally I skedaddled down this here side-alley. And here I still am while bits of them are flying up in the clouds like snowflakes." He made a noise like a laugh and shook his head.

Some of this Kilat understood. But he was more interested in the lizards climbing over the cowling of the tourists' speedboats, beached like dead sharks. The man who ran the speedboats was sitting in the shade of a tree. He called to Kilat.

"Why don't you take a ride yourself, like Mr. Rokhandy's doing?" Kilat asked him. "I'll come with you. I'd like a ride."

"Got no fuel," the man said, shaking his head. "No power. The oil tanker didn't come from Bengkulu this week. Pretty soon, everyone is going to be trouble."

"He's always complaining, that man," Kilat told George, as they walked on.

The haze was creeping over the water from the north, where the sky was a livid purple.

The Hippie said nothing. He kept wiping his face with a dirty rag.

"I'm feeling low. I never trusted no sheriff . . . Jesus . . ."

The airport was close now. They had merely to cut through the Holy Grove to reach the broken perimeter fence. But once they were in the shade of the trees, George uttered a sound like a muffled explosion, staggered to a carved stone, and threw himself down on it at full length.

"Rokhandy's wine is really bad," he said. "Not that I complain, and after all Rokky drinks it too, so fair's fair. All the same . . . Jesus . . ." He sat up, rolling himself a joint from a purse full of the local *ganja*. "Suppose those cats have truly done for themselves this time round. Those big political cats . . ."

Kilat sat and watched him with some concern. There were many things The Hippie did not understand.

"You're sitting on the tomb of King Sidabutar, George. Watch out he does not wake up and grab you! He's still got power, that old man. You're one of his enemies, after all."

"I'm nobody's enemy but my own. Jesus, I love old Sidabutar." George gave a slap to the warm stone on which he sat.

The stone formed the lid of an immense sarcophagus, shaped somewhat like a primitive boat, terminating in a brutal carved face. The blind eyes of his face gazed towards the new airport and the mountain behind. Other tombs and menhirs stood among the trees. None was so grand as the king's tomb. Yet almost all had been overcome by the spirits of the trees.

These tombs were ancient. Some said they had existed since the dawn

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the world. But the story of King Sidabutar was as solid as if itself carved in stone.

The people who lived on Sipora had once been part of a great nation. The nation lived far to the north, even beyond Sumatra, beyond Singapore, away in the Other Hemisphere. The nation had then been prosperous and peaceful; even the poor of the nation lived in palaces and ate off gold plate. So said the legend, so Kilat told it to George.

George had learnt patience. He lay on Sidabutar's grave and stared into the shimmering distance.

Powerful enemies came from further north. The nation fought them bravely, and the names of the Twelve Bloody Battles were still recalled. But the nation had to yield to superior numbers. Led by King Sidabutar, it left its homes and moved in search of peace. Thousands of people, women and children along with the men, deserted their ancestral grounds and fled with their animals and belongings. The cruel invaders from the north pursued them.

There was no safety for them in the south. Wherever the beaten nation went, it was assailed. But the great-hearted king always encouraged his people; by force and guile he persuaded them to remain united against everything. They came at last to the sea. They crossed the sea, thanks to intervention by the gods, and settled in Sumatra, the Isle of Hope. Even in Sumatra, headhunters and other ferocious tribes made life miserable for the king's people. While some of the nation moved into the forests and mountain ranges of the interior, the king himself, accompanied by the ladies and gentlemen of his court, again crossed over the seas. So he came at last to the peaceful and fruitful island of Sipora.

By this time, King Sidabutar was an old man. Most of his life had been spent on the great journey, whose epic story would never be forgotten on Earth. When he reached the shelter of what is now the Holy Grove, he fell dying. His queen tended him and wept. The old King blessed the land and proclaimed with his dying breath that if the enemies of his people ever landed on Sipora, then he would rise up again in majesty, bringing with him all the Powers of the Upper World in vengeance.

"What a guy to have for a hero!" exclaimed George. He lay smoking his joint and looking up into the branches of the *hariara,* or sacred oak. The oak's roots had spread and widened, taking a grip on the king's sarcophagus with arms like veins of petrified lava.

"Sidabutar is the greatest hero in the world," Kilat said. "You ought to get off his grave."

"Sidabutar was a bum, a real bum. One of the defeated. He got his gang kicked out of wherever it was—somewhere up on the borders of China, I guess—and spent his whole life on the run, right? Always heading further south, out of trouble, right? Finally he freaked out here, on this little dump of an island in the Indian Ocean . . . Jesus, Kilowatt, that's the story of my life. Do you think some cat's going to be looney enough to raise up a stone tomb for me? No way. Old Sidabutar is just a plain bum, like me. A plain bum."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kilat jumped up and started pummeling George in the chest. "You bastard. Just because you screw old Rokky's daughter every night, I know. Don't you say a word against our king. Otherwise he will fly right up and destroy you *flat*, just like America and Russia have been destroyed."

George rolled out of his way and laughed. "Yeah, maybe, maybe—and destroyed for the same good reason. Talking too much. Okay, man, I'll keep my trap shut, and you keep Rokky's daughter out of it, right."

Kilat was not satisfied. He was convinced he could sense King Sidabutar's spirit in the Grove. The curious thing was, he felt the same uncomfortable mixture of admiration and contempt for Sidabutar as he did for the white gods. If they were so clever, how come they ruined everything? If the king was so great, how come he let them ruin everything? They had brought gonorrhea and other diseases to Sipora—the old king did nothing about it.

But he said no more, because Dempo came running through the trees. Between complaints that his big brother had left him, Dempo had a long story to tell about a *beruk* monkey escaping while climbing a coconut tree.

"Never mind," Kilat told him. "We are going with George to the airport. It's excitingly beautiful."

George nipped out his joint and they made their way through the sacred oaks, each one of which looked sinuous enough to contain a living spirit.

Since there was no traffic, the airport guards had gone home. Nobody was about. They were able to walk right across the runway, across the magic white lines. The asphalt was hot to bare feet. Lizards scuttled away into holes as they went.

In the foyer of the airport building, two rows of floor tiling had been taken up and a trough chiseled in the concrete beneath, deep enough to take a new electric cable. But the cable had not materialised, and the trough lay like a wound across the empty space. Upstairs, a good many locals were gathered, to admire the view, to chat and pass the time. The kiosk was open, selling beer.

In the side window of the kiosk, a two-month-old newspaper had been hung. The paper was yellowing, the edges curling like an old leaf.

Under a headline reading SUPER POWERS END IT!!! was a report from Manila, describing how the long-anticipated nuclear war had broken out between the countries of the Warsaw Pact and the NATO Alliance. It was believed that Europe was destroyed. The Soviet Union had also fired its SS20s against China, who had not retaliated. The USA had made a massive retaliation, but was herself destroyed. The entire northern hemisphere was blanketed in radioactive dust-clouds. Manila was suffering. Nobody had any idea how many people had died or were dying. The monsoons were bringing death to India.

George glanced at this document and laughed bitterly. "If the poor old kicked-about planet can fix its circulation system properly, odds are on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

staying safe here in the Southern Hemisphere. Just don't let them ship in any of that radiation muck down here."

They talked to a lot of people, but only rumors could pass between them. Some said that Australia had been destroyed, some mentioned South Africa. Kilat enjoyed just being in the lounge, with its map of world communciations in marquetry on the wall. He felt powerful in the airport. This was the escape route to other lands, if they still existed.

"Will we be wiped out?" Dempo asked. "The white gods hate us, don't they?"

"No, nonsense. We are the lucky ones. The great body of Sumatra lies between us and all that destruction. Kerintji and the other giants will keep infection away from us."

He thought about his watches, and walked among the crowd trying to sell them. Nobody was in the mood for buying. One smartly dressed merchant said, shaking his head, "Watches are no good any more, my son. Time has run out." He looked very sad.

The airport siren sounded. An official in the uniform of Merpati marched into the lounge and addressed them. He held his hands up, palms forward, for silence.

"Attention. We are receiving radio messages from a plane in trouble in this area. We have signaled it to land in Benkulu, but there is trouble in the plane—illness of some sort—and they are running out of fuel. The plane will land here."

A babble of questions greeted the statement. Men pressed forward on the official. He was a middle-aged man with graying hair. He smiled and waved his hands again as he backed away.

"Do not worry. We shall deal with the emergency." His words were drowned by the siren of an ambulance, swinging out of its garage on to the tarmac just beyond the reception lounge. "We ask all those who have no official business here please to quit the airport premises for their own safety. The plane is larger than the types officially designated to land here. We may have a little trouble, since the runway is too short in this instance. Please vacate the premises immediately."

More questions and excitement. The official held his ground and said, "Yes, yes, I understand your worries. No worries if you do not panic. Please evacuate the building peacefully. We understand the plane is American, bringing high-ranking officials from San Diego."

At the word "American," the panic got under way in earnest. Everybody started to run, down the stairs or simply around the lounge.

Kilat grasped Dempo's hand and charged downstairs. They elbowed their way out through the double glass doors. They had lost The Hippie, but Kilat did not care about that. He ran with Dempo, aiming for the airport fence. The fire engine went by. When he looked up, he saw the sky had hazed over. It felt suddenly cold.

Someone whistled. The boys looked and saw George leaning against the open doors of the ambulance garage. He beckoned them over.

They ran to him; he stooped to put his arms around them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sounds like there might be a little excitement. Let's wait here. I want to get a look at these guys getting off this plane." He stared hard at Kilat, saying, "Heap bad medicine, Kilowatt."

He relit his joint, his soft face unusually grim. Kilat and Dempo squatted in the dust. They could look right across the airport to the Holy Grove, and through the grove to the sea, its surface sullen, no longer glittering.

"To see a plane come in from here will be excitingly beautiful. Have you ever been to San Diego, George?"

"If these cats survived, they have been underground, out of harm's way."

Kilat did not understand, and allowed himself to be cuddled only a minute. But he remained close to George.

After a while, George said, "Listen, Kilowatt, these cats are going to bring trouble. Plenty trouble. If they survived the holocaust and they've grabbed a plane, then they are bigwigs, that's sure. And if they come this far—like why not some place nearer home?—then it figures that some other guys along the way would not let them land, right? I'm telling you, these cats may be loaded with marines and god-knows-what, like bodyguards. They bring trouble."

"They'll—perhaps they'll be grateful to us . . ."

"Grateful, shit. Cats with guns aren't grateful. They'll be looking for one last shoot-out."

"Maybe it's the president of the United States coming to visit us," Dempo said, hoping for reassurance. He looked frightened and clung to George's leg.

Kilat said in a small voice, "You think they might take Sipora over?"

"Why not? Why the hell not? I know these cats, think they own the world. Maybe your police should gun them all down as they cross the tarmac."

Kilat looked concernedly up into The Hippie's face. He could tell George was frightened. Overhead, engine-roar grew slowly louder. The plane remained hidden in the overcast.

"We've only got six police and they've only got one gun between them. They're just for controlling tourists, that's all."

George looked wildly about. "Maybe the damned bird will crash if the runway's too short. Blow itself up and good riddance. We need those cats like we need the clap."

Dempo started to jump up and down. "Oh, I hope it crashes! I hope it crashes! That would really be excitingly beautiful."

The airport was now a scene of wild action. Sirens were blaring, and people and cars were moving about the runway. The island's one police car was trying to hustle them out of the way. Centreline lights came on along the landing strips; high-density approach lights, white touchdown zonelights, winked on. Flags were rushed up masts. More people were running up from the direction of the town.

Suddenly the noise of the plane was louder. The plane emerged from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the low cloud. It was enormous, silver, predatory, its undercarriage unfolding. It made the universe vibrate. Anyone sleeping anywhere on the island would have been awakened.

Dempo and Kilat fell over in awe.

The plane came roaring down, aiming straight for the ambulance shed, or so it appeared. Then, with a gust of wind which curled the dust off the airport, it was gone again. They saw its glaring jets before it vanished back into the cloudcover.

"Oh, it's gone away," cried the boys. "It's gone to Benkulu after all."

All the people out on the airport ground had flung themselves flat. Now they got up and ran for safety, while the cars drove off in all directions, revving their engines and skidding to avoid collision.

"It'll be back," George said. He spat on the ground. "Pilot just took a look. His instruments must be malfunctioning. Who the hell could those guys be up there? Oh, I don't like this, I don't like this one little bit."

"It's the president, I know it," Kilat shouted. He had to shout. The noise was greater. The plane had turned over the strait and was coming in again.

"Run slap into the mountain, you bastard!" George called, raising a fist to the sky. "Leave us in peace."

They saw it then. This time it was much lower, spoilers up, ailerons going down, nose lifting. The undercarriage appeared to brush the tossing palms at the far end of the field. It looked too enormous and fast possibly to stop in the length of the island.

"Crash, you bastard!" George yelled as it rushed by, monstrous, bouncing, jarring. Grit whipped up into their faces. The scream of the tires hit them. Then it was past.

It was slowing. Only a few hundred yards to go to the far fence. Both the ambulance and the fire engine were roaring along behind it.

The plane braked and juddered, while the fence came nearer. Now it might stop in time. But momentum carried it on. Stones flew.

Still thundering, the silver monster ran over the threshold markings, bumped off the end of the asphalt, and crunched through a row of flashers. The people watching through the wire fence broke and ran.

The machine swerved, rammed a wing against the fencing and ploughed in a leisurely way through the side fence, striking its nose and one engine against palm trees. Part of the undercarriage snapped. The plane sank to one side as if going down on one knee. Smoke, steam and dust covered the scene.

"Jesus," said George.

"Jesus," said the boys in imitation.

The scene seemed to hold as if time had frozen. The diffused sunlight made everything shadowless. Then one of the emergency exits opened in the side of the plane. A yellow escape chute billowed out.

Passengers began to slide down the chute, one every one and a half seconds. They came down like dolls, only returning to life at the bottom as they picked themselves up. The smashed engine was smoking. Sud-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

denly it burst into flame. Flames ran along the wing, rose up over the cockpit. Shouts came from the plane; another exit opened forward of the wing; uniformed men jumped out and fell.

"Wouldn't you know it—soldiers!" yelled George. "The Yanks are coming."

He started hurling abuse at the men lining up beside the yellow chute. They wore battle dress, helmets, and were armed with machine carbines.

The two boys could see that most of the men were in bad condition. Their faces were pale, their hair patchy. Some were bandaged. Some fell to the ground directly they exchanged the air-conditioning of the plane for the muggy atmosphere of Sipora. Although the fire was gaining hold, and their movements were panicky, the newcomers moved slowly and stiffly.

"They are ill," Kilat said. "They are bringing their diseases here. Let's skedaddle down a side-alley . . ."

"There ain't no more side-alleys, son."

As the fire-engine drove up, the soldiers stepped it, aiming their weapons at the crew. Black smoke billowed across the tarmac.

Older men were now deplaning. They walked painfully towards the airport buildings. Most of them wore peaked caps with braid, and medal ribbons on their chests. An armed escort fell in and accompanied them, carbines at the ready.

"It's the fucking Chiefs of Staff," George yelled. "Those are the bastards that started this war, and they think they can hide out in some damned bolthole in the Indian Ocean."

"They have the sickness," Kilat called, but George was already running out of the shelter, running across the concrete towards the approaching column of decrepit figures, swerving to avoid the oily smoke.

Kilat saw it happening, saw the muzzles of the guns go up, saw the faces of the soldiers. He never forgot the faces of those soldiers. They tightened their mouths, froze, became expressionless, and fired. Fired at George as he charged towards them, shouting.

The bullets came spanging in the direction of the boys. Kilat pulled Dempo to the floor as one smacked into the back of the garage. When he looked up, George had fallen and was rolling over and over in a curious way, kicking his legs. Then he stopped and lay still.

Even as George ceased to move, another noise added itself to the roar of fire. It was a quite distinctive sound, like a whistle, like a giant's exhalation. The ground shook with it. Among the trees opposite where the boys lay, clouds of steam billowed up. They concealed something rising from the earth itself, from a gaping tomb. A great figure grew taller. It came up like a rocket. Its head emerged above the crowns of the trees in the Holy Grove.

Smoke and steam wreathed that countenance like whiskers, but the expression of an anger implacable in intent was clear to see.

King Sidabutar had woken at last from his long sleep. He rose like vengeance, to summon up the Powers of the Upper World. Science was dead: now he was free to wreak destruction on his enemies. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by O. Niemand

THE DAY THE INVADERS CAME

O. Niemand is the pseudonym of a well-known science fiction author who is currently writing a series of stories in the voices of famous American short story writers. The story which follows is a tribute to James Thurber.

Some readers have written to me about the way I portray my grandfather in these stories. They complain that he's shown as a cranky, cantankerous old galoot, and that he was shut up in the attic just because he sometimes forgot what year it was. "You're awful cruel, son," wrote one correspondent, "so let that nice old codger out from the attic for a change!" Well, I suppose there is some truth in the accusation, although it was never I who put him up there—mostly grandfather retreated to the attic when the rest of our excitable family started to give him the nervous jimjams. He came downstairs often enough when he felt better, and whenever he did he caused some kind of ruckus. That's what happened the day he defended Springfield when the invaders came.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We were living in a big white house at 154 State Street, about a half mile from the wall of the dome. We were so close to the dome that from the attic window, which we could look out of only when grandfather was out of the house on one of his mysterious errands, we thought we could see beyond to the lifeless black face of the asteroid itself. My father tried to explain that we simply couldn't see craters from our house, because the dome was tinted a deep green and the artificial sunlight made it impossible to see out. That didn't stop me from believing that I could see craters. My younger brother, Parren, told a story for years about the dinosaur he had glimpsed creeping among the rills and ridges beyond the dome. We all told him that was impossible, too, but he just got stubborn and maintained that he'd seen what he had seen. My mother had the experience once of imagining that she'd observed a large three-masted sailing vessel scudding across the barren landscape, sails billowing full in the wind. My father almost went berserk. "There isn't any wind out there," he argued. My mother just shook her head defiantly. She said that she had awakened Parren, who slept in the same room with her, and pointed it out to him; but Parren reported that nothing of the sort had happened. My mother tried to make a deal with him, offering to believe in his dinosaur if he'd believe in her ship, but Parren didn't care about such a thing. He knew he had seen his dinosaur, and he didn't need mother's insincere testimony to support his claim.

Grandfather was also fascinated by the forbidding territory beyond the dome. He disappeared sometimes, and when he returned he brought back wild tales of his adventures out on the nightside of the asteroid. He generally had one of two kinds of stories: either he prospected among the low hills, certain that gold and jewels and other riches were just waiting to be discovered; or else he fancied that the treacherous Cycladians were planning a sneak attack on Springfield, and that he had to hurry to his observation post. Grandfather had been in the army during the war with the Cycladians, but that had been more than sixty years ago, and peace had been made with them a long time ago. Even during the war, they had never come nearer to Springfield than four or five light-years. Grandfather had never seen any Cycladians in his entire life. He didn't even know what they looked like.

Still, every few months he borrowed father's groundcar and raced across the asteroid to an abandoned shack near the dayside. That is what happened on the morning of the day the invaders came. Our maid, Mella, came into the kitchen with a tray. "The old gennamun he ain't there," she said. She put grandfather's breakfast on the table, and my older brother, Rys, who had finished his own, began to eat grandfather's.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mother's expression grew worried. She looked at me. "Go tell your father," she said. "Wake him up and tell him that grandfather's gone again." I didn't like the job of waking my father, but you didn't argue with mother about things like that. You didn't argue with her about anything.

My father's reaction was less concerned. He had been through all of this many times before; it just meant renting another groundcar and fetching grandfather home again. Whether grandfather was poking around for gold or keeping a weather eye out for the Cycladians, our task would be long and tiresome.

My brothers and I always looked forward to these expeditions, but my mother continued to fret and my father was just plain annoyed. We climbed into the rented groundcar, my parents in the front and the three of us behind them. Mother, as was her habit, gave my father directions in an appalled tone of voice, convinced of the imminent destruction of her entire family and her with it. My father, in retaliation, kept growling that we should lay off the arguing and wrestling in the back seat. And so the time passed as we emerged from the nightside portal and hurried toward grandfather's fortress.

We did not get outside the dome very often, so these drives were something of a treat, although the truth was that one part of the asteroid looked exactly like any other part. The darkness and the silence frightened my mother, I know, and my father was never enthusiastic about leaving the dome, either; but my brothers and I always stared with wide-open eyes at the grim terrain. "Here's where the dinosaur was," said Parren at one point. I heard my father sigh.

"How can you tell?" demanded Rys.

"I can see its tracks," replied my younger brother. We were all tired of hearing about his dinosaur, so no further inquiry was made. We weren't far, in any event, from our destination.

We checked each other's pressure suits and climbed out of the groundcar. Father led us through the shack's airlock, and when we were safely inside we shucked out of the heavy suits. Grandfather was astonished to see us, but it put him in good spirits. "Boy howdy," he cried, "reinforcements!"

"The Cycladians are coming again," said my mother sadly.

"I smell them varmints," said grandfather. "They'll attack at dawn."

One of grandfather's other little crotchets was his distrust of certain modern conveniences. He had no truck with any sort of power that came out of atoms. The shack was equipped with nuclear-generated electrical lights and heat, but grandfather had long ago supplied the place with lanterns and a pot-bellied stove. We looked at each other in the flickering dimness and knew there was nothing we could do until grandfather's mood changed. He grasped his ancient rifle, ready

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to prevent any of us from leaving the outpost. He always was a strict one for discipline, even among green recruit reinforcements like us.

My father, knowing that it was very likely a hopeless task, attempted to reason with grandfather. "This asteroid has a nightside and a dayside," he said. "There isn't going to be a dawn. Ever."

"Ye be as skeered as a duck in thunder," cried grandfather. "Don't worry, boy. They can't creep up on me."

"But if you stand there looking out that port and waiting for the sun to come up, you're going to have a long wait!" shouted father in exasperation.

Grandfather gave a short, courageous smile. "They reckon they're goin' t' ketch me unawares, but I know they're comin'. That's my secret, boy."

"I'm hungry," said Parren.

"You new men air purt near allus hungry," said grandfather sternly. "We're on short rations here. It's your skin ye ought t' be worried about, not your stummick."

"And I'm cold, too," complained my younger brother. There was a small box filled with coal, and Parren scooped some of the black lumps into the stove. The fire flared and the temperature in the shack fluttered up a degree or two.

Father had made no progress with his calm approach, and he had no more success with any other. Mother joined him in begging grand-

My father tried to reason with grandfather.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

father to come home with us, but the old coot only became angry. "Ye're askin' me to desert my post!" he shouted. "What air ye, spies for them varmints? Is that it? Just think o' your mothers and sisters, dependin' on ye at home!"

"We don't have any sisters," said Rys. "And mother's here with us."

"All the more reason," snarled grandfather. He turned back to his duty. The hours passed, the shack got colder, and dawn was as far away as ever. Eventually Parren got tired and fell asleep in mother's lap. Rys threw the rest of the coal into the stove and huddled up against me for warmth. Father glowered by himself in one corner, and grandfather stood wakeful and watchful at the shack's single port.

When we awoke we had no idea what time it was. It was still night, of course, but several hours at least had passed. It was very cold in the shack, because the fire in the pot-bellied stove had gone out. Grandfather sat on the floor beneath the port, his rifle beside him. He was studying us closely. "It's time ye woke up," he said.

"Didn't you sleep, Pa?" asked mother.

"How could I sleep?" demanded grandfather. "It's colder'n a freezer full o' shorn sheep."

"Put some more coal in the stove," said Rys, yawning and shivering.

"Coal?" asked grandfather. "Air ye crazy? What coal?"

Father explained that the previous night Parren had dumped a boxful of coal into the stove; and, he asked, was there any more? Grandfather grimaced and made some remarks about how weak-minded the younger people were these days. He usually didn't spend very much time in the cold shack, he said, because he'd rather be out in the hills, looking for gold and jewels. It was very obvious to all of us that grandfather had forgotten all about the Cycladian menace, and this was good news all around. It meant that we might be able to go home soon.

Grandfather had similar suspicions. "Ye come out here t' honeyfogle me back t' the goddam dome with ye," he snapped.

Father wore a strained smile and he patted the air in what he must have thought was a reassuring gesture. "It's cold here," he said, "and it's nice and warm at home." Grandfather snorted. "But d'ye have gold and jewels layin' about at home?" I was going to point out that grandfather didn't have gold and jewels laying about here either, but I kept my thought to myself. I learned at an early age that in a situation of this delicacy, sense and logic have little place.

It developed in the end that grandfather, in his less militant frame of mind, was easily persuaded. We let him think that he might slip away from us another day, and that the gold and jewels weren't going anywhere. At last, mummified once again in our pressure suits, we made our way from the old shack to the groundcars. Grandfather

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wanted to drive, but my mother wouldn't allow it. Father drove his own car, and Rys drove the rented one.

The trip home was made in relative peace; grandfather lapsed into a sulky silence, and Parren and I dozed. Just before we arrived at the nightside portal, however, grandfather said something that roused us. "What was all that flummery about coal?" he wanted to know. Mother repeated the story of the night before, but grandfather shook his head vigorously. "Don't ye know where coal comes from, girl?" he cried. "There ain't ever been anything alive on this goddam asteroid. Ye'd be as like to find coal here as tits on a boar hog. It'd be worth more'n its weight in gold and jewels." We just looked at each other. Back in the dome, the coal would have made everyone change their ideas about where Springfield had come from. Maybe our chunk of space debris had once been part of some larger world. It was too late for idle guesses now, though. We'd burned every bit of evidence.

Later we tried to find out where grandfather had found the coal, but he refused to admit that it ever existed. He got so tired of the argument that he never went prospecting again. From that day on, whenever he disappeared, it was to go fight the Cycladian invaders. That made it even more difficult to fetch him home, and soon my father didn't want to have anything more to do with the matter. My older brother, Rys, took over the job of going after grandfather.

My mother, however, only let out a wistful sigh now and then. "It sure would have been nice to've saved a piece of that coal," she would say. "It sure would have been nice to be rich." She was probably right about that. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TALKING THE COELACANTH JAZZ

When the bitter wind of extinction blew
Like 60 million bad-ass Charlie Parkers
Blew cold as an ice age down
The unlit alleys of the Late Cretaceous
This dude never missed a gig
Sliding in patient quicksilverous notes
Along a ragged score of Time

Just about when he'd given up the ghost
On fame at least some Indian
Ocean hick discovered him dark sluggish
Nacreous blue-button eyes lobed fins &
Slime-covered rows of scales
& all caught up in that paleontological
Sentiment he made him a star

But if you hang about the village coral
You still find him lumbering
Too late for evolution's nip
To change his style any nil no way nada

—Robert Frazier

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(from page 21)

SOLUTION TO IT'S ALL DONE WITH MIRRORS

If the *Bagel* had turned over an odd number of times in four-space, it would indeed have been reversed when it dropped back into the galaxy's three dimensions of space and one of time. VOZ knew this had not happened because if it had, the *Bagel* would have exploded the instant it landed!

Antimatter is reversed matter. If ordinary matter is mirror reflected, without altering its time direction, it becomes antimatter. As all SF fans should know, when matter and antimatter come together, both are totally annihilated. An object of antimatter as large as the *Bagel,* landing on a planet of matter, would have caused an explosion far more powerful than any H-bomb. The entire mass of the ship, plus a comparable hunk of matter on the planet, would have been transformed entirely to energy.

Mirror-reflection symmetry plays an important role in modern physics and cosmology, including the grand unification theories designed to unify all the fundamental laws of the universe. As an entertaining introduction to mirror symmetry, try this mystifying experiment. It was invented and sent to me many years ago by Frank B. Brady.

Only one of the following five sentences is false. All the others are true:

1 CARSON WAS BORN CHRISTMAS DAY 1809—LIVED TO THE AGE OF 59
2 BUFFALO BILL WAS BORN IN 1846—HIS BIRTHPLACE WAS SCOTT COUNTY, IOWA
3 HICKOK DIED DEC 3 1883—DOC BEECH DECIDED HE CHOKED
4 CUSTER WAS KILLED AT LITTLE BIG HORN MONTANA IN JUNE 1876
5 CROCKETT OF TENNESSEE MET DEATH AT THE ALAMO IN THE YEAR 1836

A mirror will instantly identify the false sentence. Just hold this page upside down in front of a mirror and look at the reflection. The false sentence will be the only one you can read!

Why should the glass reverse the four true sentences, and leave the false statement unaltered? If you can't figure it out, turn to page 184.

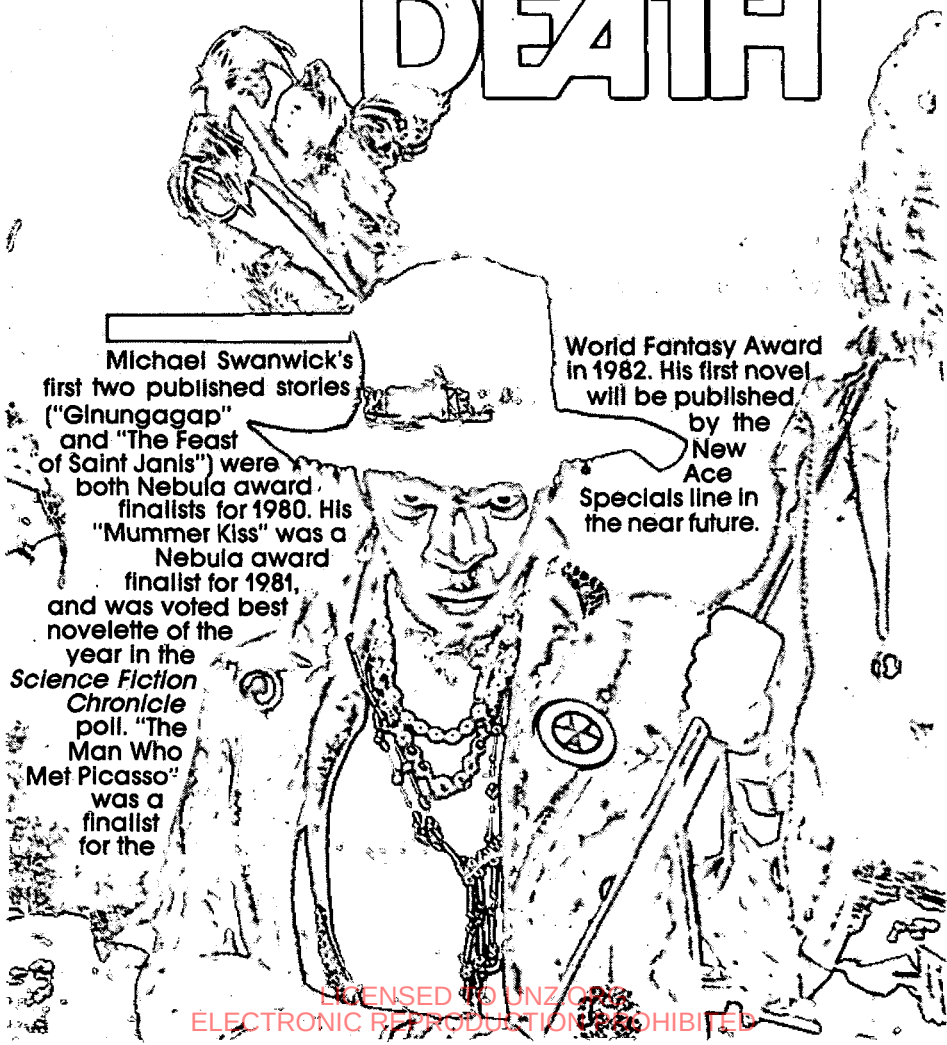
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

art: J. K. Potter

by Michael Swanwick

MARROW DEATH



Michael Swanwick's first two published stories ("Ginungagap" and "The Feast of Saint Janis") were both Nebula award finalists for 1980. His "Mummer Kiss" was a Nebula award finalist for 1981, and was voted best novelette of the year in the *Science Fiction Chronicle* poll. "The Man Who Met Picasso" was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award in 1982. His first novel will be published by the New Ace Specials line in the near future.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Boston had an old world charm not to be found in the United States. The secret police, the curfews and shortages, the war hysteria, the constant presence of the mounted Militia—none of these could detract from the city's beauty.

Patrick Cruz O'Brien sat in an open-air cafe, the latest *People's Globe* spread open before him, and a glass of foxwine by his left hand. His polesat transceiver—a clutch of instrument chips grafted into a portable typewriter with a whip antenna and independent power source—crouched at his feet like a faithful mongrel dog.

Throngs of workers in proletarian denim filled the street. They were returning to their homes and barracks, dinner buckets in hand. Not one in a hundred of them could have afforded the meal Patrick had just finished eating.

Briefly, Patrick felt the warm glow of being exactly where and what he *should* be: The war correspondent in exotic but civilized surroundings, waiting for the furtive contact that would lead him to the rebel strongholds in the mountains. He felt like Hemingway, or Ernie Pyle.

Then the information officer assigned him said, "Maybe there's a story in that for you."

Children were selling bundles of driftwood by the side of the street. Draymen urged their wagons through the crowds, carting manure, ashes, and bone out of town to the alchemies, there to be transmuted into soil and eventually sold to outlying farms. There was a leavening of American, Canadian, and Quebecoise nationals in the crowd, bright and garish among the drab prole blues. An African strode by, his electrified arm bangles weirdly bright in the dimming light. "I'm sorry," Patrick said with forced politeness. "I wasn't listening."

"The recycling project," the information officer insisted. He leaned forward, and Patrick again noted how clean and unfaded the man's denims were. "Surely you could write about that." He pointed across Exeter to where the last of the city's Tall Buildings was being dismantled for its raw materials. Only the top third was gone, its demolition as slow and laborious as the construction of a medieval cathedral. Late afternoon sunlight flashed furiously as a gigantic pane of glass was wrestled in by antlike workers.

"One," Patrick said, "on the way north, my packet stopped in Manhattan, and I have already filed more stories on scrap metal, skyscraper mines, and unbuilding techniques than I hope to God ever to have to file again. And two, dismantling a building is not news. It's local color. Although I don't expect a civil hack like yourself to understand the distinction."

A Militiaman rode by on horseback, his leather harness creaking. The proles made way for him, faces averted. "Now if you want to talk about *news,* we could discuss those two Ethan Allen missiles that disappeared from Cambridge last week. Can I assume they were stolen by Drift insurgents?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The man leaned back uncomfortably, looked away. His paunch strained open his jacket, pink flesh peeking from between two buttons. "The People's Militia are not missing any weapons."

Patrick formed a steeple with his fingertips. There was a fine breeze from the waterfront, and over the rooftops he could see the masts of ships at anchor, each—regardless of nation—tipped with an antenna for stealing weather data from the few remaining seasats. He wondered what would become of the shipping industry when the last of their orbits decayed and there were no more. "Ethan Allen is a tacknuke class, isn't it?"

The man sighed. "There were no thefts, I keep telling you. If any rocket batteries had been stolen—"

"Batteries?" Patrick asked with interest. "How many missiles are in a battery?"

The information officer leaned forward—Patrick whipped his wineglass aside—and tapped the newspaper significantly. "Perhaps you could file a report on our local press."

One third of the *Globe*'s front page was taken up by a story about an exotic dancer in one of the cabarets who actually showed her naked stomach. There was a blurry photo of her face. The rest had obviously been assembled from government press releases. Except for the photo of a kitten with a ball of yarn, which might well have been in their files from the twentieth century. Back at the *Atlanta Federalist,* they called papers like this crapsheets.

"Let's just drop it, okay?" Patrick said disgustedly.

The sky was darkening and the crowds thinning. A waiter carried off the two tables nearest theirs. "The curfew will be in effect soon," the information officer said. And when Patrick did not respond, "It's easy enough for you to just sit there—your papers will protect you. But I'm in the civil service. The Militia won't even look at my papers."

Patrick smiled nastily. "I expect you'd better be running home then, hadn't you?"

Blandly then, the man said, "Well, maybe I'll stay."

"Please," Patrick said. "Don't bother pretending you're not a police spy. It's painful to watch you try." He stirred the dregs of his wine with a fingertip, and gave up all hope of making his contact that evening.

"Excuse me, gentlemen."

Someone slapped a handful of papers up on the table. Patrick glanced down, startled. A well-dressed old man—a dwarf, with huge head and shrewd eyes—stood before him, smiling. "Take a look," he urged.

Patrick glanced over the titles. "The Distribution of Radioisotopes in a Fresh Water System," said one. "Reproduction of the Sand Flea in Difficult Environments," read another. "Human Migration Patterns Within the Drift."

"Get out of here!" The information officer raised an arm, as if to take a swat at the old man. Perhaps he thought that dwarfism reflected badly on the People's Bureau of Health.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"This man is my guest," Patrick said firmly. He offered a chair, and the old-timer climbed up on it.

"Robert Esterhaszy," the dwarf said. "I've just submitted copies of these to the *New England Journal of Radioecology*. They charge an arm and a leg for publication, but they're not subsidized by the government, so it's worth paying extra for the credibility. Look at this." He separated out a piece of paper from the rest, slid it to Patrick.

It read: "I'm your contact. Can't you get rid of this jerk?"

Patrick looked up and shrugged almost imperceptibly. Esterhaszy nodded to himself, then removed a billfold from his pocket. He slid out three orange bills and laid them side by side in front of the information officer. "Take a hike," he said.

Without the slightest hesitation, the man took the money and left.

"Jesus," Patrick said.

Esterhaszy grinned. "Thought you were familiar with corruption, eh, kid? Come on, pay up and let's go. We have a carriage waiting."

As they stood, Patrick folded his copy of the *Globe* so that only the topmost quarter showed. CEASEFIRE IN DRIFT the headline read. And in a smaller subcaption: Truce To Be Signed Within Month. "Have you seen this?" he asked.

Esterhaszy barely glanced at it. "Don't believe everything you see in the papers."

To go by appearance only, the carriage might have been built in Victorian times. It was new, though, manufactured in the Greenstate holding of Albany, and the suspension, axles, and tires were the product of late twentieth century technology. An automobile would have cost less, but internal combustion engines were banned from the city area, as part of the government's program to limit coal fuels to the reindustrialization effort.

After a glance through the curtain at the darkening street, Patrick asked, "How strong is your revolution here in the capital?"

Esterhaszy lit up a fat marijuana cigar. "I don't know what they've told you, kid," he said, "but there's no revolution *within* the Greenstate at all. It's simply Drifters trying to kick out the exploiters. We got no program for dissatisfied Greenstaters at all. Let 'em launch their own war."

"Fair enough," Patrick said. "Tell me, from your own point of view—what is this revolution all about?"

"Coal."

When the man did not go on, Patrick said, "Could you elaborate?"

"Sure. The only thing the Drift has that anyone wants is the coal fields at Honkeytonk. Last surviving hunk of anthracite in North America. It's currently being operated by the Drift Corporation for the joint benefit of the United States and the Greenstate Alliance. They mine the coal, crack it, and ship half the coal oil north and the other half south. What we—the people of the Drift—want is to cut ourselves in on the profits."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The carriage was thick with smoke. Unobtrusively, Patrick cracked his window to let a little fresh air in. "That's a very cold reading of your own cause, Mr. Esterhaszy."

"I'm an old man," Esterhaszy said. "It's too late to kid myself. Obviously we think we're justified. But you'll have to talk to some of the younger folk to get the revolutionary jargon." He chuckled.

"What about this truce? Is it actually being considered? Will it be signed?"

Esterhaszy sobered. "Oh well, it's true there are negotiations going on between the Drift Corporation and ourselves. In fact, that's the main reason we're here in Boston, to speak with some intermediaries. And it would be nice if we could settle it with words. But no, I'm afraid there's a lot of blood and dying ahead of us before this one gets sorted out."

Secretly—unworthily—Patrick felt relieved. He'd sunk a lot of time into this junket, and had no desire for the war to fizzle out before he got to it. Covering wars was how a correspondent made a name for himself. This little revolution could do his career a lot of good.

"Still," Esterhaszy said wistfully, "at least we're talking. So there's always hope."

The carriage stopped. Through his window, Patrick could see old brick walls, and nothing else.

Then the door opened, and a woman stepped in. She was tall, and dressed in a red evening gown. Her hair was long and straight and white as albino flame. She kissed the dwarf on the cheek, then offered Patrick her hand. "Victoria Paine," she said. "I'm the figurehead of this particular revolution."

Patrick felt lightheaded. He saw stars sparkling in Victoria's hair. Belatedly he realized that he had inhaled a lot of smoke from Esterhaszy's cigar. He hesitated, then said, "You're a very beautiful woman, Ms. Paine."

She threw her head back and laughed, exposing a long white neck, and a necklace made of small, oddly-shaped lumps of silver. "No, no, I'm not. It's the height and the hair that fool you. If you look closely, you'll see that I'm actually rather plain."

The carriage lurched forward into the night. As she talked, Patrick studied the revolutionary closely: She was painfully young, perhaps nineteen, and her eyes were a blazing green. There was a thin pink triangle about her nose and mouth—the abrasion line from her nucleopore mask—but other than that her skin was pale and clear. And yes, if you ignored the life that shone through her face like clear, pure flame, she was far from lovely.

"We could have the Corporation out of the Drift by spring, if we could only get our people off their asses," Victoria was saying. She spoke rapidly, urgently, as if she might not have the time to finish her next sentence if she dawdled. "But when you've got a life expectancy of—what is it, Uncle Bob?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Twenty-two point three years."

"Yeah, it's hard to get Drifters to give up a chunk of their lives, they've got so little of it. But by the same token, they're very emotional, very volatile. If we could find the right rallying point, we could *raise* them. Sometimes I think we need a martyr, like—" She hesitated.

"Horst Wessel?" Patrick suggested.

"Nathan Hale," she said coldly.

"What about those two batteries of Ethan Allen missiles you stole in Cambridge? What are your plans for them?"

Victoria grimaced and said, "That's Fitzgibbon's baby. You can ask him about them when you meet him."

"One more question," Patrick said. "I understand that your mother was something of a legendary figure in her time—some kind of mystic or healer, I get varying stories. Has her memory been an influence on you? Was it a factor in your involvement with this revolution?"

"Why not ask her yourself? She's sitting right next to you."

The hairs on the nape of Patrick's neck crackled. He felt a strong sense of *presence* crowding against him on the seat, a hard certainty that someone was there beside him. His head whipped to the side, and he found himself staring into the cold, cold eyes of a pale-faced woman wrapped in a shawl. There was a dark blotch on her forehead.

Then everything resolved itself, and the woman was gone. The shawl became the window curtain, pulled back to afford a glimpse outside. The reflection of his own pale face stared back from the dark pane. And the forehead tattoo was only a finger-smudge on the glass. Patrick twitched the curtain shut, feeling a small, involuntary thrill of horror.

"Gotcha!" Victoria crowed. For a fleeting moment her age showed, and she was young, painfully young.

But despite the laughter, her eyes were serious. She was watching Patrick, studying him, as if something very significant had just happened.

Twice they were stopped by the Militia, once as they crossed the isthmus that used to be the Back Bay landfill, before the harbor waters had reclaimed their own, and once at their destination. The first time they passed with a few muttered words from the driver. The second time, Esterhaszy handed out a white envelope with a red wax seal. "Real Arabian Nights stuff, eh?" he chuckled as they were waved up the drive. "Like something out of The Count of Monte Cristo."

"Damned poor security," Victoria observed. An automobile came up behind them, cut impatiently across the lawn to pass around them. At the end of the gravel drive, they alit.

A string quartet could be heard, delicately mingling with party chatter. Patrick admired the tall, dark oaks and the orange-lit windows of the mansion. "Electric lights," he said. "Must be outside the city limits, hey?" Then, "Tell me. Exactly where are we, and why are we here?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Frowning, Esterhaszy said, "We're here to meet with some very influential people who will be attending this party. You, however, are only here because we'll be leaving immediately afterward for the Drift. I don't expect you'll suffer much discomfort waiting in the cab for a few hours."

Patrick glanced up at the luggage rack. His own bags were there, behind the driver, who kept his face averted from them. "Listen, couldn't you get me in? Just for a peek?" Then, seeing their expressions, "Strictly off the record."

"Well . . . "Esterhaszy said. "We'll try. But the best we can hope for is to get you into the kitchen."

By standing to one side of the kitchen door, half-crammed behind a serving table, Patrick could avoid the scurrying help, and get a glimpse down a long hallway, and into the party. The people looked rich and even glamorous from that distance, but he knew, having covered similar socials in Atlanta, that he wasn't missing much. Perhaps half the guests wore denim, but their suits were crisp and new, more an affectation of humility than a political statement.

There was a man standing just within the hallway, watching silently, hardly moving. After a time, Patrick snitched a glass of wine from a tray and took it to him. "Here," he said. "Must be tough, trying to guard a crowd like this."

The man turned slowly, studied Patrick with unblinking eyes. "Thanks," he said at last, and accepted the glass. He sipped delicately, then pursed his mouth in thought, all the while staring into the party. "Republic of California," he said at last. "Very good stuff."

Patrick followed the guard's gaze to a figure in red. Her hair stood out like a torch. "Quite a woman," he said noncommittally.

"That bloodsucker?" The guard spoke with quiet assurance. "I could kill her from here, you know that? Like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Why would you want to?"

The guard looked at him again. "If you don't know who she is, you must be the only person here who doesn't." He handed back the glass. "Here. I can't drink on duty."

Patrick slugged down half the glass. The string quartet struck up, and half the party was given over to dancing, something slow and stately and old-fashioned. A gavotte or contra or something. "You seem to be the only one here who's upset," he observed.

"I believe in the revolution," the man said. "But by the same token, I'll obey its leaders. If I'm told to serve guard duty, it doesn't matter that the people I guard are fools or traitors."

"Your leaders don't seem to share your loyalty."

The guard didn't even glance his way. "A Southerner couldn't understand. But *seventy years* after the Meltdown that created the Drift, there were still active nuclear reactors in New England. I bet they don't teach that in your schools. And those suckers were only designed to last for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thirty years. They were kept limping along by the capitalist oligarchs, and their running dogs in the government. It took a socialist revolution to finally shut them down. We're here because of the revolution. Remember that."

"Uh . . . right." Patrick saw Esterhaszy coming his way, and faded back to the end of the hallway, by the kitchen. There, he bent over so the dwarf could speak into his ear. "Time for us to be moving on," Esterhaszy said sharply. "We've done all our business here."

Patrick hesitated. "I thought Victoria was coming with us?"

Esterhaszy glared back at the party, and at the tall, elegant man dancing with Victoria. She nipped the man's earlobe with even white teeth, and he threw back his head and laughed. "She's old enough to bed down whoever and whatever she wants to. It's none of my business if she wants to fuck a pig."

Five days later, Patrick and Esterhaszy arrived in the Drift. There had been no trouble making rail connections for the border town in New York Holding, by the badly-defined edge of the Drift. But once in Kingston, they'd waited for three days in a shabby old hotel bar before making contact with a gun smuggler. Over sour local beer, Esterhaszy cut a deal for them to hitch a ride in on the smuggler's alcohol-burner. They had left that night, and been dropped off while it was still dark.

It was almost noon now. Patrick sneaked a finger under his nucleopore mask and scratched. The thing was hard to get used to. "Are you sure this is the right place?" he asked.

Esterhaszy was sitting in the shade of what might have been an apple tree. Its fruits were rotting on the limb, brown and liquescent, whatever they were. Behind him a vast, semicollapsed brick factory building seemed to stretch on forever. Before him were the crumbled remains of an interstate. "Sure," he said. "I did some salvage work in this very building once—Empire State Gasket. Long as whoever's picking us up knows how to find it, we're all set."

"Terrific," Patrick muttered. But just then a muted whine rose from beyond the roadbed, and Esterhaszy was on his feet, clutching his Gladstone in both hands. Patrick hoisted his handgrip, looped the transceiver over one shoulder.

A battered old four-wheeler drove up the middle of the cracked and crumbling road. At the wheel was a tall, dark man wearing a remarkable hat. The wind threatened to blow it off as he approached, and he set it down beside him, revealing a perfectly hairless head. He pulled to a halt before them.

"Old Esterhaszy! You surely do look like all fools in one, standing there." The man laughed.

"And you look like one fool in a Halloween hat," Esterhaszy snapped.

Patrick tried not to stare at the driver. The man wasn't wearing a mask; he seemed obscenely unprotected. Patrick could see his decaying teeth, the pink insides of the man's mouth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't need the whiteman mask," the driver said, as if in answer to Patrick's thought. "The spirit people, they protect me from the boneseekers, the marrow death, the hot sting of the radiation wind."

"Save that voodoo crap for somebody who'll be impressed by it. I want you to meet Patrick O'Brien. Patrick, this is Obadiah. He's a conjur man—kind of a quasi-religious con artist."

Obadiah stood up in the four-wheeler, slowly unfolding into the tallest, most emaciated human being Patrick had ever seen. He was seven feet tall, if an inch. A battered old frock coat opened to reveal loops of chains and amulets on his bare chest. His clear bright eyes transfixed Patrick. "I be your salvation in time of need, friend Patrick," he said. "I be your black Jesus. I crack your soul open and fill it with the *shock* of recognition!"

"Christ!" Esterhaszy muttered. "Let's just get the hell out of here, okay?"

The conjur man lifted a tall beaver hat with feather dangles and bits of mirror in the band, and seated it firmly on his head. With a good-humored wink, he said, "Old Esterhaszy has no appreciation of the power of vernacular speech."

The smell of burnt alcohol wafted up from the engine as Obadiah throttled it to life. Patrick held his transceiver cradled in his lap, and they drove off into the twisted wilderness of the Drift.

Hours passed. The vehicle slowly negotiated roads that had crumbled almost into non-existence. Patrick was tired and bored, and he sweated like a pig in the midday heat. "Most native Drifters are vegetarians," Esterhaszy was saying. "They'd have to be quite literally starving to eat meat. That's because the boneseekers increase in concentration the higher up the food chain you go, until—"

"Hey," Patrick said. "No offense, but I've been writing about the food chain and radioisotopes and chelates and genetic drift since I came north, and frankly I'm sick to death of it. I came here to cover a revolution, not to become the goddamn science editor. When do I get to cover some real live *news?"*

Obadiah had been listening in silence; now he threw his head back and laughed, a chilling laugh and one that went on for far too long, irrational, eerily close to madness. Esterhaszy sulkily shifted in his seat, said "You'll get your news," and lapsed into grim silence.

They were in the foothills now, the road steep and winding, broken to loose rock in places. Time and again, streams ran along the roadbed, occasionally undercutting a bend. Obadiah drove wildly, recklessly, plunging over ruts and clumps of brush that grew out onto the pavement. "Where are we, anyway?" Patrick asked.

"Just that way is the treaty town," Obadiah said with a careless flip of his hand. "Got a clearing coming up. You want to stop for a look?"

"If he doesn't, I do," Esterhaszy said. When they reached the mountainside clearing, Esterhaszy lifted the binoculars and stared downslope for a long time. Then he handed the glasses to Patrick.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The town was rankly overgrown with trees; Patrick couldn't even spot it at first. His vision shifted from forest to city to forest and back. Gangs of Drifter laborers, white rags over their mouths and noses, were at work clearing the town, under the supervision of a few armed Corporation Mummers. They were chopping down the trees, and piling them into heaps in the center of town to be burned.

"It looks okay," Esterhaszy said. "But you can't trust that bastard Piotrowicz. I wouldn't put it past him to be planning some kind of trap." He sighed, signaled to Obadiah to start up the engine again. "Well, Fitzgibbon is in charge of tactics. Nothing we can do about it."

"I thought this treaty wasn't going to come off," Patrick said.

Again Esterhaszy shrugged. "Hell, I don't suppose it will hurt us to listen, eh?"

The road narrowed and became a dark tunnel as trees interlaced overhead. The four-wheeler left deep ruts in the loamy litter of leaves that buried the pavement. Obadiah drove slowly here, and with his head tilted to one side, as if listening to unseen voices.

Patrick, watching him surreptitiously, saw that Obadiah had a small earphone in one ear, disguised by feathers and bits of fur. He wondered briefly if it was possible the man had unearthed a functioning hearing aid from some abandoned house, decided it was more likely just part of his costume.

Then Obadiah brought the jeep to a sudden halt, and leaped out. With an insane laugh—almost a scream—he bounded up into the woods and disappeared.

"Hey!" Esterhaszy stared after him in disbelief, then clambered down. "You wait here," he told Patrick. "You'd only get lost."

Awkwardly, he jumped a ravine at the road's edge, and hurried upslope after the fugitive conjur man.

Left alone in the still, hot summer air, Patrick felt half-drowsy, vaguely petulant. So far his performance as a war correspondent hadn't been exactly stellar. Well, grow up, he told himself. Boredom is a part of life.

Then he heard a distant growling, soft and almost subliminal at first, but growing swiftly. Motor vehicles approaching.

Patrick snatched up his transceiver, and jumped down to the road. He had no idea who might be coming, but anyone he encountered on a lonely road in the Drift had potential for news.

Ahead, a four-wheeler rounded a corner, followed swiftly by another dozen of its kind. At the sight of him they pulled to a confused halt, the foremost not a hundred feet away.

The jeeps were loaded down with Corporation Mummers in black uniforms and berets, their white masks dazzling in contrast. An old man in civilian clothing stood up in the lead car, and querulously called out, "Who the hell are you?"

With a small electric thrill, Patrick recognized the man from old morgue photos. It was Keith Piotrowicz, head of the Drift Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and possibly the one man Patrick wanted most in the world to interview. "Mr. Piotrowicz, sir!" he cried out. "I'm Patrick Cruz O'Brien from the *Atlanta Federalist.*"

He started forward, hand extended, in the best tradition of war reportage. A meeting like this was golden. It was almost too good to be true.

A shot sounded—a flat *crack* like two boards being slammed together, and Piotrowicz bent slightly forward. His hands flew up to his chest, and his eyes opened wide in astonishment. He stumbled over backwards, falling into the rear of his vehicle. The two Mummers in his car grabbed for him. Patrick stood petrified with shock.

In one of the rear cars, though, a Mummer had recovered swiftly, and he snapped off a hip shot. A bullet whizzed by Patrick's ear and the side of his face tingled coldly in reaction fear. He heard the gun go off. The red dot of an aiming laser touched his sleeve, danced toward his heart.

Terrified, Patrick threw up his hands in surrender, turned, and tried to run. He lurched to the side as another bullet flew by, stumbled on the edge of the road, and fell clumsily into the ravine.

Three more rifle shots snarled, and bullets slapped into the earth overhead. In blind panic, Patrick scrabbled at the edge of the ravine, trying to climb out. Loose, moist soil crumbled under his hands, gave way, let him fall again.

The Mummers were holding their fire now, advancing on him. Patrick could hear them running forward. He thrashed through brambles and fallen tree limbs, deeper into the ravine.

The transceiver was gone, dropped in his haste. A cool part of his mind registered the fact and, insanely calm, said that he must go back to retrieve it. But his body was not under his conscious control. Twigs lashed across his face, leaving stinging red welts. His boots splashed in a trickle of muddy water underfoot.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw a Mummer loom into sight, head and chest rising above the branches, and lift a rifle to his shoulder. Patrick froze. The man paused with his stock halfway up, jerked suddenly, and fell.

Patrick gawked at the place the man had been. Then his mind focused on what his ears had heard an instant before—a sudden surge of cries and shouts and gunfire.

The noise doubled as the Mummers returned fire. Everything became a confusion of meaningless sound, of explosions and screams.

"Up here!" a voice shouted. He looked up to see Esterhaszy standing above him, offering a hand out. He seized the hand and was almost thrown out of the ravine, he was hoisted up so fast.

"Upslope! Come on!" They ran through the trees. Patrick's stride was longer and he took the lead, but whenever he wavered to one side, Esterhaszy was there to urge him upward.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Over his shoulder Patrick saw flickering shapes on the roadway below, a mass of horses and men, and among them a slim, active figure with shocking white hair flying like a banner. The Mummers had regrouped about their four-wheelers, and were trying to turn them on the narrow road.

Patrick slowed, hesitated, feeling the loss of his transceiver for the first time. "I ought to be covering this for my paper," he said uncertainly. Esterhaszy gave him a hard shove in the back, sending him stumbling forward.

"Don't be a goddamned hero. There's a nice grassy meadow ahead, and you can watch the show from there."

They broke into a clearing that was bright with flowering weeds, and fell to the ground. Patrick snatched up Esterhaszy's binoculars, rose and quickly scanned the land below. "God *damn,*" he swore.

The Mummers were gone. Three disabled jeeps were canted across the road, and a handful of corpses dotted the ground. Horses milled about as the bodies were swiftly looted, and smoldering rags stuffed into the vehicles' fueltanks. Then the attackers whirled their horses and retreated back into the woods. The road was empty.

Patrick stood, white and trembling with adrenaline reaction. Something big had just happened, he could feel it. It was more than just an assassination, it was a declaration of open warfare. And—"I blew it," he said in soft wonder. "I was right there, and I ran away."

"Took your time getting here, though," an amused voice said.

Patrick turned and saw Obadiah sitting cross-legged in the grass at the far end of the meadow. He had two horses and a pony hitched to a leafless sapling. "Got your transportation here," Obadiah said. "Somebody already taken care of the four-wheeler."

Lost in his own failure, Patrick said nothing. But Esterhaszy stormed up to the conjur man and lifted an angry fist. "Dammit, I worked *hard* to set up that treaty!" he raged. "And this little stunt smashes it flat into the ground."

Obadiah grinned complacently. "Ain't it a bitch?"

The first of the jeeps went up in a pillar of flame.

They reached the guerrilla encampment at sunset. It was sited in a small, deserted town, so overgrown with scrub and mutant creeper that it was invisible until they were upon it. The rebels had built their campfires and pitched their tents within roofless shells of buildings. They came and went between campfires, making it hard to gauge their numbers.

A rebel ran up to take their animals. He jerked his head toward one building. Faded paint barely legible on its windowless side read STEREO DISCOUNT. "In there," he said. The man's skin was piebald, all hand-sized patches of pink and brown, like a human quilt.

The building's first floor had collapsed into the basement long ago, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the rebels had lashed together a makeshift ladder to allow ingress. Patrick and Esterhaszy clambered down.

Two brightly-colored tents were pitched at opposite sides of the cellar, with a campfire midway between. At their approach, Victoria whooped, and ran up to hug Obadiah. She thumped his back vigorously. "Nicely done, old fraud! We had the spirits riding with us this time, for sure."

Obadiah made a face. "Somebody cut it a little fine there at the start," he said. "Almost lost us a reporter."

Victoria dismissed this with a shrug. "They weren't expecting us, is the thing," she said. "It wasn't just the truce—they weren't expecting a daytime raid. We really caught them with their pants down." Then she turned to Patrick, as if noticing him for the first time. "Stand right there."

She darted into a tent, emerged holding his transceiver by the strap, and dumped it at his feet. "You're no use to anyone without this," she said. Then she whooped and slapped his back. "Welcome to the *war,* boy!"

Esterhaszy, ignored through all of this, glared angrily at her retreating back.

The moon had risen, and the rebels were clustered about their campfires, talking excitedly. Patrick moved quietly between fires, as they bragged to one another of the day's exploits, of each Mummer killed, of how the bodies had jumped as the bullets struck them. He listened silently, reconstructing the events, discounting the braggadocio. And he studied the pecking order.

Both Esterhaszy and Obadiah ranked high in this assemblage, that much was clear, possibly through their connection with Victoria. They in turn deferred to Fitzgibbon, a bearded, bearlike man with one useless arm. He walked with a slight limp, and his eyes were bitter and filled with hatred. Still, there was a sense of raw, animalistic power about him, and his rumbled orders were carried out immediately.

Patrick could tell that Fitzgibbon outranked even Victoria. She did not give orders in his presence. But by the same token, he was careful what orders he gave when she was about. And the common run of soldiers treated her with a kind of awed respect that was special.

Between campfires, Patrick saw a man holding a cup to the neck of a spavined-looking horse. Blood flowed black in the moonlight, stopped when the man touched the horse's neck again. The transition was too swift for him to have staunched the bleeding. The beast had probably been implanted with a tissue-inert catheter.

Patrick followed as the man gingerly climbed down the ladder to Victoria's encampment. He saw the man proffer Victoria the cup on bended knee. She accepted it graciously, raised it to her lips.

All conversation stopped as Victoria drank. Eyes watched intently. She finished the cup in one long draught, and this seemed to please her observers; they returned to their conversations.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As Victoria lowered the cup, she shivered and barely managed to suppress a smile. Her hair flamed in the moonlight.

Off alone in the dark, Patrick stared at the rebel leader, horrified and fascinated. Rubble crunched under approaching feet, and Patrick turned to see Esterhaszy at his side. "Short bowel syndrome," Esterhaszy said softly. Victoria was deep in conversation with a guerrilla; he had no nose and his skin was waxy. "It's a rare deformity, thank God. Just try keeping a child afflicted with it alive! And *these* superstitious louts try to see something special in it."

A shriek of hideous laughter split the darkness. Obadiah appeared in the doorway above the ladder. He danced, waving a small radio receiver in the air, and cried, "I been listening to Radio Boston! Piotrowicz been hospitalized!"

A cheer arose, but he waved it to silence. "They more! The Drift Corporation, in conjunction with both American and Greenstate governments, has offered a reward of *five hundred* Bank of Boston dollars for the apprehension or proof of demise of one Patrick Cruz O'Brien, for complicity in the assassination attempt on Keith Piotrowicz. Ain't that something?"

Again they cheered, but this time mockingly, jeeringly. Faces turned to stare at Patrick. Even Fitzgibbon's dark visage wrinkled sardonically. Victoria threw her head back and laughed.

As soon as he could, Patrick moved away from the fire, into the darker shadows between one tent and the wall. He could hear cheers and laughter rise from one part of the camp after another as the news was passed from fire to fire.

Esterhaszy laid a hand on his shoulder. "Listen," he said after a moment's silence. "Be sure to dry your socks by the fire before you turn in tonight."

Patrick stared at the man, surprised that he *could* be surprised by anything anymore. Esterhaszy looked uncomfortable. "It's an old campaigner's trick, something you ought to know. You'll go to bed cold and miserable if your feet are wet."

Later, when all but the outposts were asleep, Patrick was still up. Feeling bruised and humiliated, he crouched by the campfire and added a handful of twigs to the glowing embers. They smouldered, went up in a sudden blaze of light, faded again.

By Patrick's schedule, the polesat would pass overhead about an hour after midnight. And whatever else had happened, he still had a bulletin to file. He thought for a minute before composing the dateline, then typed out: IN HIDING.

Socks drying by the fire, he set to work on his story.

Breakfast the next morning consisted of sourdough wrapped around a stick and baked over coals. Patrick was just finishing as Victoria ap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

proached. He bolted the last mouthful, washed it down with the last of his beer, and slid the mask back over his mouth. "Come on," she said. "I'm taking you and Uncle Bob for a ride."

They drove off in a four-wheeler. On the outskirts of the camp they passed an overgrown cemetery. A work crew was digging there, unearthing coffins and dumping their contents on the ground. One soldier collected wedding rings, while others broke teeth free of jawbones, smashing them in metal nutcrackers for the silver fillings.

Patrick looked at the necklace of oddly-shaped silver lumps that Victoria still wore with her khaki fatigues, but said nothing. "We're going to pick up a delivery," Victoria explained. "Something a city-prospector has unearthed for Fitzgibbon." She turned to Patrick and said, "Well, aren't you going to interview me?"

"Uh, yeah," Patrick said. He still felt a little fuzzy from lack of sleep. "I've been talking with a lot of your people, and they seem to feel that you have some kind of supernatural powers. Do you?"

"*They* believe I do. Me, I'm a politician. I agree with the majority of whoever I happen to be with at the moment."

"Okay, but when you're among people who believe—what exactly do they believe you can do?"

"Well," she began almost—but not quite—reluctantly, "they believe I have a Destiny. And in pursuit of that destiny, I will get clairvoyant flashes, the occasional glimpse into the future—that sort of thing."

"Is that all?"

"No, I can see radioactivity too. A hot area looks like it's glowing—usually deep red or dark purple. Kind of pretty. A hot wind seems to sparkle; I think that's just low-level ionization I'm seeing. And as a side-effect, I have an absolute sense of direction. Because the Meltdown site is a very strong presence to me. Wherever it is—even hundreds of miles over the horizon—I can feel it. Right now, for example, it's over in *that* direction." She pointed off to one side.

Patrick looked in the direction she pointed, and yearned for a compass and a good map. "Have you ever been tested for this? Under laboratory conditions?"

"No," Esterhaszy said. "What would be the point?"

"And probably most importantly, I get advice from my mother." Victoria paused. "She tells me . . . things I must do, and this counts a lot among my followers, because they believe that when she was alive, she was a very powerful witch."

"Sounds to me like you're a bit of a witch too," Patrick offered.

"No. My mother could heal, and I can't."

"Our destination is right in the heart of the Beast," Esterhaszy said late that afternoon. "Small place just off of Honkeytonk, central to the little constellation of holdings the Corporation has put together."

The four-wheeler bounced heavily. Patrick's stomach felt miserable. "How much farther?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Almost there now—look, just through those trees."

Their destination turned out to be a Victorian house, in amazingly good repair, set in a clearing just above the Susquehanna. The roof tiles were green and the sides and trim were painted three shades of red. Dirt paths led up and down the river, into the woods. "There's practically a village here," Esterhaszy said. "Little shacks all over. You'd be surprised how much business a whorehouse can generate."

The road twisted through a stand of leather-leaved trees, and the house disappeared. A log was thrust across the road at waist height, and Victoria had to slam on the brakes to keep from piling into it.

A giant stepped out of a guardhouse hidden among the trees. A shotgun held casually in one hand looked ridiculously small and out of scale. He squinted at them through a pair of amateurishly-twisted wirerims. "We're here to see the Mermaid," Victoria said.

"Long time, no see, Sid," Esterhaszy said. Smile lines appeared around the giant's mask. Tucking the gun under one arm, he made a series of quick signs at them, his hands swooping and soaring like birds.

Esterhaszy grinned ruefully. "Maybe so, maybe so. Listen—any Corporation types up at the house?" The hands flew and were silent. "Well, because if there are, we'd want to postpone our visit is all."

Sid signed something else, then ambled back into the trees, to draw back the log. They passed down the lane, and parked before the house.

Hex signs were mounted on either side of the main door, to ward off radiation, Victoria explained. She touched the center of one, and then her forehead. Esterhaszy scowled and muttered, "People will believe in just about any kind of superstitious crap nowadays."

Patrick hitched up his transceiver, adjusted its weight. "I'd think you'd be rather tolerant of superstition, considering the use your movement makes of it."

"Those suckers won't stop the boneseekers from passing through whenever there's a strong breeze. What they ought to do is cover the whole thing over with a geodesic with nucleopore skin and an airlock. Then they could decontaminate the interior, and it'd be as safe as Atlanta."

"Where would they get that much filter?" Victoria asked, amused.

Then the door opened, and the madam appeared in it. At the sight of Victoria, the smile crinkles about her eyes disappeared. "We don't want any trouble," she said. Behind her, several prostitutes peered out, bony young things with wary eyes. Patrick was appalled to see how unhealthy-looking they were. Some of them had to be seriously ill.

Victoria said nothing. One of the whores reached around the fat woman to lightly touch Victoria's sleeve. Still, she did not react.

"We want to see Rebecca Schechtman," Esterhaszy said. It would have taken a blind man to miss the relief on the woman's face.

"Around back by the dock," she snapped, and slammed the door in their faces.

A dirt path led around the house and down to a small houseboat moored

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to a river dock. A wide wooden ramp bridged the gap between houseboat and dock, and at the far side of it sat a woman in a wheelchair, taking in the sun. When they hailed her, she hastily drew a blanket over her lap. But Patrick had already gotten a good look at her legs. They were fused together, misshapen, with no separate feet.

"Sirenomelus," Esterhaszy explained quietly. "It's a birth defect. Swims like a fish, though." He ran ahead of the others to greet her, bounding on deck and affectionately putting a hand on her shoulder, massaging it gently. "The Susquehanna's no place for you, Becky," he said. "When are you going to find a cleaner river?"

The mermaid shrugged. "Suits my business," she said. Then she put an arm around Esterhaszy's waist and squeezed. "It's good to see you, you old goat."

She led them to a storage room just off the whorehouse kitchen. There, some twenty metallic suits lay carefully lined up on the floor. *Astronaut suits,* Patrick thought, and for a giddy instant marveled at their age, and their impossible survival.

Then—just as small differences were adding up, and Patrick could see his error—Esterhaszy said, "Where in the world did you ever find seven radiation suits?" And they weren't for outer space after all, but mere lead worksuits, protective covering for men who worked with beta and gamma emitters.

Victoria touched the first almost reverently, and shivered. Then Esterhaszy took out a scintillation meter and began running it over the suit, passing its pickup carefully over every square centimeter of surface.

"How much?" Victoria asked. She removed her necklace of silver nuggets, carefully untangling its several strands.

While negotiations dragged on, Patrick wandered to the kitchen door, and peered in. A clutch of hookers were ladling out their suppers from a kettle. He stared at one, a weak and anemic-looking blonde, almost boyish in figure, with short-cropped hair. There was something odd about her, though he couldn't exactly place what.

The whore looked up and, seeing him in the doorway, smiled sweetly. She flashed open her gown, revealing small, sweet breasts and a set of tiny male genitalia dangling over her female parts.

Patrick blushed and looked away. The women laughed uproariously.

Then the others emerged from the storeroom. "Listen up," Victoria said. "R&R if you want it. But get some sleep afterwards. I've paid for rooms for us on the top floor—any company, you pay for yourself. We leave at dawn."

"Want me to give you the fee schedule?" Esterhaszy asked.

Patrick looked at the whores. He was horny enough, God knew. But they had laughed at him, and he doubted he'd be able to forget that. Then too, Victoria was listening. "No thanks, I've got some writing to do."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the evening, Drift Corporation workers from the nearby alcohol farms filled the common room. Most of them could expect to spend their week's earnings on a quick half-hour here. They lingered before spending, stretching their money as much as possible. Laughter and piano music strained into Patrick's room.

Patrick pulled a pillow over his head, squeezed his eyes tight. Footsteps hurried along the hall, and a door slammed. Leather bedstraps began creaking in the room next door. Patrick tried to ignore it. A few minutes later the noises stopped, and the door banged open again. Beds began to creak in other rooms. There were small human noises as well.

It took him a long time to get to sleep.

A hand touched Patrick's shoulder and he awoke with a start. Victoria was leaning over him. She put a finger to his lips, and said quietly, "Let's get a move on. The Corporation is on our tails."

Patrick dressed quickly under the blankets. "How do you know?" he asked.

"I just *know*," she whispered urgently. She led him out into the hall and down the back stairs. From the yard, Patrick got a glimpse into the common room, where the hookers mingled with their customers. The women had bright makeup marks in the middle of their foreheads and—like some of their clients—didn't wear masks.

At the four-wheeler, Esterhaszy was struggling to load the newly-crated radiation suits. When Victoria and Patrick pitched in, he grumbled, "Don't know why I bother. Just because you had one of your dreams."

"Look," Victoria said exasperatedly. "Have I ever been wrong? Have I ever once been wrong?"

"How could they know, though?" Esterhaszy said. "Mama Rosa runs a tight ship. She might not like us, but she'd never—say!" He looked at Patrick. "What did you put into that story you filed tonight? You didn't mention visiting a joyhouse, did you?"

"Well, I figured—"

"Jesus! How many whorehouses do you think there *are* in this neck of the woods? How the—"

"Never mind that," Victoria said. "Can we slip past them?"

Esterhaszy threw up his hands. "We don't even know they're coming."

"Look there," Victoria said. Way off in the darkness, there was a small, pale, almost invisible light. It moved forward, disappeared. "Idiot waited a frazz too long to turn off his lights." There was the faint humming noise of distant vehicles approaching.

"So I'm wrong," Esterhaszy said. The four-wheeler was loaded. Victoria hopped in, handed Patrick a rifle. "There's only the one road," she said. "If we move fast enough, we might just be able to blast through them."

There was a gleeful note in her voice, and Patrick realized that she was enjoying this, actually looking forward to the confrontation, with a kind of blood-lust that was beyond his comprehension.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Patrick handed back the rifle. "I can't fire this thing. I'm a neutral."

"Then die!" Victoria laughed. The piano was tinkling gently in the background. Voices combined to sing *Yellow Submarine*. She handed the rifle to Esterhaszy, who expertly broke out the clip, snapped it back in.

"There's got to be another road out," Patrick said.

"Nope." Victoria started the engine.

Thinking as quickly as ever he had in his life, Patrick said, "Wait." There was another chance.

Somehow the four-wheeler wallowed down the dirt bank and onto the dock without tipping over. They were unloading the suits onto the houseboat before Schechtman wheeled out to see what they were doing. She emerged from the cabin livid with rage.

"Just don't give us any sass," Victoria said in a friendly voice. She gently brushed the muzzle of her rifle against Rebecca's lips. The mermaid shut up.

"All done." Esterhaszy unslipped the lines. Patrick grabbed a pole and helped push off.

Slowly, silently, the houseboat separated from the dock. The river current slapped lightly on the hull, lulled it downriver. Again they leaned on their poles, putting their backs into it. With agonizing slowness the houseboat eased into deeper water.

Back on shore there was motion in among the dark trees. At first Patrick thought it nothing but the firing of rods and cones within his eyes. But no—up there above the house, that was a four-wheeler for sure. And that swarm of midges that flowed silently along the bank—Mummers.

Victoria had dived into the interior of the houseboat as they had shoved off. Now she emerged again, lugging something that looked like a knapsack with an attached length of garden hose. It was a Lakes Federation make laser pistol with battle-harness power source and connecting fiber optics cable. A real antique.

A dark figure crested the bank and halted at the sight of the boat out on the water. The soldier raised rifle to shoulder, and aimed.

Dropping the backpack and raising the pistol unit simultaneously, Victoria braced herself and fired. A needle of ruby light, so brief as to be almost not there at all, lanced through the man's heart. Silently, he fell.

"A scout," Esterhaszy said. "I don't think anybody else has noticed us."

Patrick opened his mouth, said nothing. The houseboat continued sliding downriver, and the whorehouse grew smaller.

"Burned out the cable," Victoria said in disgust. She nudged the power pack with her foot. "Lucky we're not all dead."

Rebecca Schechtman was looking on with a curious expression. "How did you know where I had that hidden?" she asked. "Nobody knew about that."

"How did I know you were bluffing when you said you wouldn't take

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my final offer for the suits?" Victoria said. She boosted the apparatus into the river. It made a noisy splash, then vanished.

There were two rooms in the houseboat. Victoria commandeered the larger for herself, sent the mermaid to the other, and ordered Esterhaszy to stand guard on deck. Then she led Patrick inside.

The cabin was softly lit by an alcohol lamp. Outside, the Susquehanna chuckled and whispered as it floated them downstream. "Do you know what the first principle of leadership is?" Victoria asked. "It's don't sleep with the troops. It destroys discipline."

She paused.

Patrick had been automatically scribbling down her words, rephrasing them into euphemisms acceptable to the *Federalist's* readers. But when she paused, he looked up with sudden surmise.

Victoria fiddled with the top button of her shirt. It came undone. Absently, she played with the next, and it too loosened. "It can be a real problem," she said. "Because after combat, you're really wired. Just hopping with all this nervous energy, and sex is an awfully good way of dealing with it."

She looked directly into his eyes, waiting for his next move.

Victoria made love hard, and she left bruises. If Patrick had been any less aroused than she, he could not possibly have enjoyed it. But with all the pent-up desire and excitement of the past week, he found himself responding in kind, energetically and with an intensity that was almost frightening. Lost in the feel of flesh against flesh, he could no longer tell where his body ended and hers began. In that instant he could not have distinguished between himself and her.

Afterward, she held him tightly, and cried into his shoulder. But when he asked her why, she simply shut her eyes tight and shook her head. He could feel the fear within her, but he could not read it.

In the morning, Patrick awoke before Victoria. He dressed quickly, and went on deck. He walked out slowly, trying to undo small cricks in his legs, and found that the boat had beached on a bend of the river. Esterhaszy was leaning on the rail, staring out into the water. Patrick joined him, saw that Schechtman was swimming gaily in the brown river water.

With a flash of white breasts, she surged forward and swept her arms across the surface of the river, spraying them both with water. Laughing, they retreated, and she swam off some distance.

"Jesus," Esterhaszy said wonderingly, "to be young again! *There's* a primordial experience, eh?"

But Patrick only smiled. He had his vampire lover in the cabin, and could watch mermaids with cool detachment.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By noon, Esterhaszy and Victoria had gone foraging and returned with a horse and wagon. As Patrick helped load it, he asked, "Where did you get this rig, anyway?"

"The owner gave them to us because he liked our looks," Victoria snapped. "Any more stupid questions?"

Leaving the mermaid to shift for herself, they went on to rendezvous with Fitzgibbon. To Patrick's surprise, they curved around Honkeytonk and rejoined the rebels in a covert camp within quick striking distance of the coalfields. "We could never pull this sort of operation if Piotrowicz were still in charge," Fitzgibbon said in a pre-attack interview. "But his subordinates are all political appointees—mediocrities. They'll be dazzled by the obvious."

They attacked in late afternoon, as the shifts were changing and miners filing wearily out of the mountain. Patrick watched from the mountainside above Honkeytonk, as the rebels attacked from two sides. He had wanted to be among them, but Fitzgibbon had refused to risk him. Indeed, the rebel captain had ordered him guarded and kept from the action, forcibly if necessary.

What he saw was a confusion of people running and yelling. Some of the people were shooting weapons. He could make out little pattern to the scurrying about.

There did not seem to be many Corporation Mummers in the fight, which confirmed what Fitzgibbon had said, that the main forces had been led away for a vengeance raid on what their leaders had been made to think was the rebel encampment. Honkeytonk was left all but undefended.

As Fitzgibbon explained it, "They know we can't hold Honkeytonk. They know we won't destroy it. And they know it's not worth the loss of soldiers to steal what little we can carry off."

"Then why are you going to attack?" Patrick asked.

And then Fitzgibbon's face had twisted up in a snarl, and his withered, curled arm grasped spasmodically at his shoulder. "To make the bastards *pay*," he said in a chilling whisper. "To make them suffer, as I have!" Then, catching himself, "No, that was off the record. We're doing it for psychological purposes. To show the miners that we can, that we're not without strength, and that we don't ultimately intend to hurt them."

Off the record, my ass, Patrick thought. He smiled politely.

The conquerors formed a parade through the center of town. Townspeople flooded out of the crumbling brick buildings, to watch and cheer. They all wore white masks, almost all of cloth and only a few of nucleopore filter.

An aged woman kissed Victoria's boot as she rode imperiously by, and the rebel leader didn't even look down.

Following after, pushing his way through the jubilant crowds—either the Corporation was not very popular here or its advocates stayed wisely inside—Patrick noted with horror that most of the children were visibly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

malformed. They had twisted arms and legs, oversized and lopsided skulls, club feet and cataracts, wens and cysts, and toothless jaws. The adults were not so ravaged by birth defects, and most spoke in Southern, Midwestern or Philadelphia accents. But they were riddled by disease, marked with newpox scars, missing fingers or hands from accidents in the mines.

This was the first close look Patrick had had at Drift society. The rebels were a comparatively healthy lot; few of these people could have kept up with them.

He found Obadiah painting radiation hexes on the doorsill of what had been a Corporation Mummer bunkhouse, and paused to talk. "This be my work," the conjur man said. "Esterhaszy sets up a medical station for the grown, and I set up a conjur hut for the tiny. Between us, we handle life and death." And when Patrick asked, he explained, "Parents bring in their newborn for me to pass judgment on. I decide whether the mutations are functional or not, judge whether the child can survive. If it passes, I hand it back to the parents."

"And if not?"

Obadiah stared down at his large, knobby hands. "Hey, man. You can't expect parents to do it to their child themselves."

Patrick backed away, went looking for Victoria. She was busy directing her people in various tasks, but paused to give him a squeeze and a kiss. When he said something about the children, she nodded. "They break your heart, don't they? But think of their parents. Imagine knowing that your child could have been healthy if you'd had the money to buy a new mask whenever the old one wore out, for water purifiers, and gnotobiotic greenhouses. . ." Her voice trailed off. "Hell, I'm beginning to sound like Uncle Bob."

When Patrick went back into the crowds, a fourteen-year-old albino girl snagged his arm. "Hey mister. You with the rebels?"

"No," he said. "Well, yes. Sort of. Why do you ask?"

"I want—" She choked, and went into a coughing fit. Finally, she hawked up a load of phlegm. "I want to join them." She was slight and breastless, with long, thin hair.

"It's not an easy life."

"Just so long as they give me a *gun.*" The girl spoke so fiercely that she began coughing again. She bent over almost double before she could control it. "Just so long as I get to kill Mummers."

"What's your name?" Patrick asked.

"Heron. They killed my parents. There was a strike. The food didn't come from the farms, and some of the miners took over the shafts. They wanted the Corporation to open up the storehouse, feed everyone. So the Corporation said sure, all right, and when they came out from the mines, the Mummers grabbed them all and took them outside of town and shot them. And left them there."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Go on," Patrick said quietly.

"So I—when I came out of the mines today and saw what happened, I went out to where the bodies were so I could bury them. You know? But the bones were all mixed together, so I didn't know which ones were right. So I was going to bury them all together. In one—in one hole, right? Only I didn't have a shovel."

The child stopped. "How long have you been working in the mines?" Patrick asked.

"Five years."

At sunset a chair was set up for Victoria in the center square of Honkeytonk. Small fires were built to either side, for dramatic effect, making the chair appear a throne. The prisoners—the handful of Mummers that remained, and the Corporate management—were lined up behind her, and those who dared could lodge complaints.

Watching from the sidelines as the first few townspeople came hesitantly forward, Patrick felt his vision blurring. He rubbed his eyes, and his sight recovered for a moment, then grew fuzzy again. Victoria was listening to the complaints. She swiveled to question one of the prisoners. Patrick closed his eyes again. Colors swam on the back of his eyelids, coalesced into shapes, then images, and became suddenly crisp.

He was looking out onto the square but from a different perspective, from someplace close to its center. The square was transformed, too, overlaid with dark, intense colors. The shadows were shot full of light, and the smoke from the fires to either side of him drifted up, their depths lit with deep, purple foxfire.

He did not accept any complaints. He listened carefully, and judged solemnly. Then he pointed out three of the prisoners, and they were taken aside and shot.

The pillars of darker-than-blue smoke drifted up overhead, their somber fires extenuating and thinning as the smoke spread in the windless air. The dark sparkling was the radioactive particles that had been sucked up from the soil by the trees they were now burning. As the smoke fanned out, the particles swirled and looped like snowflakes. Then, infinitely slowly, they rained down over the people of Honkeytonk.

The radiation was everywhere, in the soil and on the sides of the buildings as well as in the air, and Patrick itched to see how the crowds stood unnoticing as it swirled slowly about them. The remaining prisoners were stripped of their masks and clothing, shaved bald (amid much laughter) and marched off, to be shoved outside the city limits.

The warehouse had been broken into, and those supplies the rebels could not use themselves, were tossed into the waiting hands of the crowd. Looking around at the excited throng, hands out and grasping as tins of food, tools, bolts of cloth were thrown this way and that, Patrick suddenly saw himself, standing alone at the edge of the square, white-faced and unsteady, eyes closed tight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Startled, he opened his eyes, and the hallucination was gone. He stood in his own body, and no flickering radioactive fires lightened the dark square.

Victoria was looking directly at him. There was an amused smile on her face.

At that moment Obadiah ran out of the warehouse, and with a blood-curdling scream, leaped into the air. People edged way from him. He whirled his long staff three times over his head, and pointed it into the open warehouse doors.

From inside came a great explosion of flame. The crowd gasped involuntarily and stepped back. Obadiah laughed, ran to the shadows crouching like an ape, then reappeared, swinging a stool wildly. He ran frantically to one side, then to the other. Then he slammed the stool down before Victoria, and sat motionless as a statue at her knee.

"I will now accept new soldiers," Victoria said. Behind her, the warehouse burned merrily.

After a moment's stunned silence, there was a stirring in the crowd, and a man stepped forward. Another followed after him, and then a woman. In short order there was a line of some thirty-five people. Fitzgibbon strode quickly before them, pushed three away. One of the three was Heron. Angrily, she stepped back into line.

This time, with a small smile, Fitzgibbon let her stay.

Patrick noted how Victoria looked at the young albino and shivered almost imperceptibly. *She's reminded of herself,* he thought, then rejected the idea as wild and sourceless.

Flames in the background, the recruits were brought forward one at a time to Victoria's chair. Each swore allegiance to the cause, placing a hand on the tip of the conjur man's fetish staff. He opened a vein in each's arm and collected a few drops of blood apiece in a goblet. When they had all sworn, he presented the cup to Victoria.

She drained it.

Now Obadiah opened a small cut on Victoria's shoulder. Again the recruits were called forward, one by one, to taste a drop of her blood.

They approached more reluctantly this time, and touched lips to shoulder. Except for Heron, their contact was swift and fleeting. She, however, closed her eyes as she kissed Victoria's shoulder, and her throat worked, sucking in blood. When she straightened, her eyes were slightly glazed. She backed away slowly.

"You are mine now," Victoria declaimed, "and I am yours. I would die for you." She glared about her. "Do you doubt me? But you must be willing to die for me as well."

It was night by now, and there was a full moon. The rebels, slightly larger in number, rode out. Patrick was among them, and for him the moon doubled, joined, redoubled, time and again, through the night.

The party dwindled by tens and twenties, as detachments were sent

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

away. "The Corporation is still hunting us," Fitzgibbon explained. "And I don't have any immediate use for a large force."

By dawn only some forty rebels remained. Most rode horseback, but there were three four-wheelers among them. "The hell of it," Esterhaszy was explaining to a bleary-eyed Patrick as the sun came up, "is that the money's there. Enough for masks and chelates and greenhouses and hospitals for everyone. But it all goes to rich bastards in Boston and Philadelphia." They were topping a rise just then, and Victoria cantered up and said, "Heads up, Uncle Bob!"

Esterhaszy looked startled, then rose in his seat and cried, "Utopia!"

In the valley below, still wrapped in the shadows of night, was what looked like an antique version of the future. Utopia was a settlement of tidy walks and geodesic domes. There was a rustic-looking watermill by the small river, and a homebuilt windmill by one of the complexes of greenhouses. It looked like nothing Patrick had seen in the Drift, because there was not a single rehabbed pre-Meltdown building. It had all been built new.

"This is the wave of things to come," Esterhaszy said happily. "The valley is a natural green spot, hardly any radioisotopes in the soil at all. The rains bypassed it. But we work to cleanse it of what does seep in, too. Over there, that's our waste treatment plant. And by the forge there is the water filtration system. Bit by incremental bit, we're removing the boneseekers and radioactive traces from the soil, taking it out of the food cycle."

"This is where you normally live, I take it," Patrick said.

"Along with a few friends. We're a pretty technology-minded batch, and what's wrong with that? By God, you *need* technology, if you want to have any kind of life in the Drift. A century ago they were making plans to live on Mars, Venus, the Moon—why not apply the same principles to the Drift?"

At Utopia, the inhabitants came out to warily greet the rebels. Victoria slipped away by herself, and Esterhaszy took Patrick to meet his wife, Helga, who turned out to be a tall, blonde woman. Her face was worn and weathered, and there were vicious scars across both her cheeks. As they all three talked, Patrick leaned back in his chair, and wearily let his eyes fall shut.

Instantly, he felt wind on his face. He found himself standing in a grassy, green field, before a small white tombstone. Uncle Bob's geodesic was to his back. He carried a few wildflowers, picked along the way, and now he let them fall before the stone. An incredible sorrow weighed down on his heart, and a huge, gnawing fear.

"Oh, Mama," he said—only this time he realized from the start that he was imagining himself in Victoria's place. "I wish you'd come talk to me."

There was only silence.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's been too many years. I need to hear from you again. If you'd only give me a few words, I'd feel a lot better."

Victoria waited, heard nothing. She glanced sideways at the dark presence that loomed over the horizon, the heavy feeling of menace that she could never entirely ignore.

Victoria? Patrick thought, trying to reach her even though he knew it was only another hallucination.

Startled, Victoria whirled around and saw no one. Back in Esterhaszy's home, Patrick opened his eyes and found the dwarf anxiously hovering over him.

That evening Obadiah performed a radiation ceremony. While the celebrants knelt and waited for the herbs and chelates that would protect them from radiation sickness and marrow death, he danced something solemn and ceremonial, rod in one hand and an active geiger counter in the other.

Standing in the doorway of his dome, Esterhaszy watched with a disdainful smile. But then several Utopians, his friends and neighbors, joined in the ceremony, taking the sacrament of chelates and herbs. Esterhaszy turned red, "Just what the bloody hell is going on?" he demanded of Victoria.

She didn't look up from the piece of needlepoint she was working on. Helga had told Patrick that it was begun when Victoria was fifteen, and that whenever she came home, she put a touch more work into it. "Fitzgibbon's been recruiting," she answered carelessly.

Esterhaszy turned back to the door. "That's Jeremiah Peltz! And Rabbit! He's taking both my engineers!"

"You know what we need them for."

"That's supposed to be a *threat!*" he shouted. "You don't need my people when you're only bluffing."

Victoria started to say something, then stopped. She stood up slowly, and stretched. "It's awfully claustrophobic in here," she said, and left.

Patrick caught up to Victoria in the middle of the field behind her foster parents' dome. The grass and weeds were waist-high there, a dark, shadowy mass in the night. They swayed gently about her as she stared off into the sky. When he put an arm around her, she shuddered but did not move away.

"I really do love them both," Victoria said at last. "But my God, they can be insufferable." She giggled. "Did you see the look on Uncle Bob's face when I walked out on him?"

"Maybe you should—"

"Oh, don't give me advice." Victoria reached behind her head, unsnapped her mask. It fell free and she took a deep breath. Then, seeing Patrick's expression, she said, "It's okay, we're in a clean area. Look—not a sparkle, not a glint, not the merest firefly hint of boneseekers, poisons, dark and venomous vapors. . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Are you stoned?"

"What?" Victoria stared at him blankly. Then a smile broke through, turned into an almost goofy grin. "Just a little giggle I got from Obadiah." Then, as he continued to stare at her, "Well? Take your mask off. Come on. Planning to be a prig *all* your life?"

Patrick glanced back at Utopia, at the tidy curves of domes and the atavistic fire in its center. Small figures, dark in silhouette, were being led in worship by the conjur man. He directed them with sweeps of his rod; from the distance he looked like Moses. Slowly, Patrick removed his mask, filled his lungs with sweet air.

When he turned back to Victoria, she had already thrown aside her shirt, and was hopping on one leg to pull free of her pants. He moved to help her, and they tumbled to the ground together, flattening the tall grass, rolling over and over in it, suddenly happy and carefree.

At the instant of Victoria's climax, Patrick's mind was flooded with sensation, her pleasure crashing through him, not at all like his own orgasm or what he would have imagined hers to feel like, but different, unexpected. And in the midst of his confusion and excitement, he became aware of someone standing over them, a woman whose features he could not see. "When you need me, I'll be with you," she said.

"What?" Patrick lifted his head and looked about. But no one was there, no more than there had been a second woman in the carriage back in Boston. He looked at Victoria and asked, "Did something just happen?"

But she only smiled happily and shook her head. Eyes gleaming, she reached out a hand to brush fingertips against a nearby white stone.

Somehow, Patrick was not surprised to find that they had been screwing on her mother's grave.

When the rebels next made camp, Esterhaszy was not among them. He had stayed behind in Utopia.

They were forced to pitch their tents in the middle of a brown-out, a valley where the Meltdown rains had heavily saturated the soil with radioisotopes. The vegetation was sparse and stunted; what little grew died out quickly. Dust puffed up underfoot. Only Obadiah did not wear a mask.

That night they held another radioprotective ceremony. The lead suits were lashed to a string of X-shaped pole frames, looking for all the world like a line of bulky scarecrows. With shrieks and leaps and arcane ceremony lifted from Catholic and Native American rituals, the conjur man daubed them all with red and yellow paint in strange, cabalistic sigils.

Victoria tapped Patrick's shoulder. She looked tense. "Press conference." She jerked her chin toward Fitzgibbon's tent, and Patrick followed her in.

Fitzgibbon was seated on a camp stool, slowly rubbing some balm on the chapped skin of his withered hand. He nodded somberly at Patrick's entrance. "We're losing the war," he said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO THE USER
ELECTRONIC DISTRIBUTION PROHIBITED

"Are you?" Patrick flipped his notebook open, jotted a quick note. "From here you look like you're doing pretty well."

"This is a war of attrition." Fitzgibbon stood, a massive, threatening man. "It's not enough to survive—we must prevail." He glared at Patrick over his mask. "Autumn is coming. We live off the land and its people—off their surplus. Come winter, we'll have to go dormant. In the spring we can re-form, but we won't be in shape to fight again until summer. Half the year is lost to us.

"Meanwhile, the Corporation is supplied from outside. They aren't hampered by winter. They can afford to laugh at us!"

He started to his feet, and stalked back and forth in the small tent like a caged panther. As he walked, his crippled arm curled up in a spasmodic clench, relaxed, then clenched and relaxed again, over and over.

"What do you plan to do?" Patrick asked.

"We have a weapon," Fitzgibbon said. "Something big and dirty enough to force both the Greenstate and American governments out of the Drift forever. We have something evil!" He paused, and Patrick could see that he was grinning painfully beneath his mask.

"Something evil," Patrick echoed politely.

Fitzgibbon whirled, and his great dark bulk crouched over Patrick menacingly. His heavily muscled healthy arm reached out, hesitated, withdrew. "By God," he said. "If I thought you were mocking me, boy, I'd—"

"All I want," Patrick said quickly, "is a clear statement of whatever you're trying to tell me." He held his ground, hoping desperately that his fear did not show.

To one side Victoria watched intently, her face pale.

Exhaling slowly, letting the anger ease away in one long, protracted breath, Fitzgibbon sat back down. "All right. All right, I'll—Listen. Back before the Meltdown, every nuclear reactor produced tons of radioactive waste material each year. A lot of it was low-level stuff, and we're not interested in that. But there were tons of plutonium in the used fuel rods. They were placed in cannisters about so high, so broad, and stored away. In the more sophisticated dumps, they'd bulldoze a hole in the dirt, drop the cannisters in, and bury them. But at most reactors, they were stored on-site in temporary facilities—warehouses—while they waited to make arrangements for final burial. Sometimes these arrangements took years, and sometimes they were never actually made. Are you listening to this?"

"Every word." Patrick made a meaningless mark on his pad.

"We're going right into the heart of the Drift and pick us up some of that plutonium." He chuckled. "We're going right up to the Meltdown reactor itself."

Patrick's skin crawled. He managed to keep a poker face, though. "Radioactive materials degrade," he pointed out. "Even if it were weap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ons-grade stuff a century ago, you'd need a fair-sized industrial base to refine it now."

"To make bombs, yeah. But we don't need an explosion—we have the people who can process it into a fine powdery dust. That's simple enough when you have the know-how. And we have the missiles to deliver the dust with. I don't believe we need any more than that."

Horrified, Patrick blurted, "You wouldn't dare—"

Fitzgibbon exploded up out of his chair, his withered arm clenched and curled almost into a knot. "*Yes!* By God, I would dare!" He leaned over a low table with maps spread atop it, and slammed his fist down on it. "One burst upwind of Boston, and the dust will flow over the entire town. It will filter through the streets and houses. People will breathe it in without realizing a thing—not until they sicken, and start to die."

Fitzgibbon was staring off into the night now. He spoke with the calm fervor of a visionary. "It won't begin for a day or two. Then they'll fall down in the streets and be unable to get up, they'll rot in their beds, and keel over while they're squatting over their chamber pots. Fires will start, and there'll be nobody to put them out. Those who stay alive longest will kill one another for what canned and bottled food exists, and nobody from outside will dare go in to help them."

"There must be a hundred thousand people in Boston," Patrick said in a sick voice. "Two hundred thousand."

"It won't be anything new," Fitzgibbon said. "It all happened before. Right here."

"It does not have to happen," Victoria said. "The missiles and powders won't be ready until next spring, next summer at the earliest. If we can get the Drift Corporation out before then. . ." Her voice trailed off uncertainly; she looked to Fitzgibbon for confirmation.

Reluctantly, he nodded. "Yes. We are not interested in destruction for its own sake. If there were no need, we would not use the missiles." Then his voice brightened a bit. "However, you saw what happened at Honkeytonk. We won a major battle, and only got thirty recruits out of it. It'll take some kind of miracle to win our fight before then."

Away from the tent, Victoria clenched her hands and said bitterly, "I did not join up to become famous as the woman who killed two hundred thousand civilians."

"Why, then?"

She gave him a tight little smile. "To be a *hero,* that's why. I'm not going to live long, I want my life to burn bright in the night, like—like some kind of beacon, either urging people on or warning them away, I don't care which. But it's got to be good and whole and pure. I want those bastards to admire me when I'm gone! And it's got to be under my own control, not that of Fitzgibbon or blind necessity or. . ." She hesitated. "Or anyone else!"

Patrick reached out to touch her, and she jerked away, then strode

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

angrily off into the night. He went back to his tent to write up the interview.

Patrick threw in a few purple additions of his own, largely in the description of the dusting of Boston, which he played up heavily. He realized that this was what Fitzgibbon wanted him to do, that he was effectively serving as the propaganda arm of the revolution, but he didn't care. It was important that the outside world know.

When he was done, he walked the copy over to Obadiah's tent. The conjur man scanned the text quickly, then said, "I'm afraid most of this will have to be cut, old son. I can maybe transmit the first five paragraphs with only a word or two changed here and there, and then all this background stuff toward the end. But that's all."

"Why?"

"For the same goddamn reason we took your transceiver away in the first place. How many places do you think there are we can pick up radwaste in the Drift? Any of this shit gets out, we have every fucking soldier in the world waiting for us at the Meltdown."

"No thanks," Patrick said. "All or nothing." He took hold of the story.

Obadiah refused to let go, and for a brief, ludicrous time they acted out a small tug-of-war over the manuscript. "Tell you what," the conjur man said. "I'll start it out 'Censored by the People's Provisional Government of the Drift.' See? That way they know they's parts of the story don't go through. Then you get the hard copy back and you can send it uncensored after we gone and pick up the plutonium. How 'bout that?"

Patrick hesitated, let go.

The deeper they traveled into the Drift, the drearier the land became. The green, relatively clean lands became rarer, the brown spots closer together. By day they were plagued by swarms of insects, none of which Patrick could identify. Obadiah chuckled. "Old Esterhaszy could tell you their names, most of 'em. But some—no. They new. There be genuine mutations in the insect kingdom, a lot of 'em, because their generations be so short, and because there's a large population to work with. In the animal kingdom, not so many, and most probably don't breed true."

Something iridescent blue landed on Patrick's hand. Its thorax throbbed twice, and it stung him.

"God damn!" Patrick whipped his hand away, and the insect tumbled and flew off. The sting was beginning to swell already; it hurt fiercely. "I'll be glad as hell when I finally leave this godforsaken wilderness!"

"Oh?" Obadiah said innocently. "They's nobody you mind leaving behind, then?"

For a second, Patrick didn't get it. Then he ripped off his mask, and spat at the conjur man's feet. He stalked off angrily.

Victoria looked haggard that evening. They had traveled hard and fast, and it showed. When she tried to pull Patrick atop her, he held back.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" he asked. "You need a good night's sleep, not a roll in the sack—why are you running yourself into the ground?"

"Oh Jesus." With a groan Victoria sat up. She eyed Patrick silently for a moment, then said, "I keep telling you, I don't have your life-span. When I was born, they gave me twenty years at best. If I reach thirty, it'll be a medical miracle. And I don't expect to reach thirty. Nights like this, I'm amazed I'm still alive."

"But that's exactly what I'm saying. If you took care of—"

"I'm a vampire," she said in exasperation. "I don't get any nutrition out of normal food. I can only digest whole blood or egg whites—which means that I feed right off the top of the food chain. There's no way I can avoid the radioisotopes. Greenhouse food or the tinned stuff from outside the Drift won't feed me. Every meal is another dose of death, another step closer to dying of leukemia, like my mother did. So if I want what little time I have left to count, I've got to live fast and glorious. Get it? I don't have the time for deferred gratification."

"Listen, I'm sorry if—" Patrick began. But she rolled atop him, effectively stopping him from saying more.

Sometime later, in the midst of their passion, she muttered, "The worst of it is," and then something else.

Patrick stopped, lifting her slightly away from him. "*What* did you say?"

There were angry tears in Victoria's eyes. "I said the worst of it is that I think maybe I love you."

It was as if a pain that was so slow in growing and so all-embracing that he hadn't even noticed it was there, had suddenly gone away. Patrick threw his head back and laughed. "That's wonderful! That's the best news I've heard all—"

"It is not!" Crying, she hit him in the chest, hard. "It is not. Oh God, this is absolutely the most horrible thing that's ever happened to me in my entire life."

A week passed. They were in the most heavily polluted regions of the Drift, where few travelers went and nobody lived. They passed through a dark stand of rotting trees, phosphorescent fungi glowing on their boles. The ground was damp underfoot.

"Old Esterhaszy'd give his eyeteeth to be here," Obadiah observed. "It'd be his big chance to name something squishy after himself."

Beyond the wood the land was half-barren, great expanses of baked mud cut through by erosion gullies. Outlying scouts twice reported spotting small Corporation Mummer patrols at a distance. Once a helicopter passed within earshot. It was clear that they were being hunted.

"Thank God we took out Piotrowicz," Victoria observed after the copter had faded away. "We couldn't 've jerked *him* around like this."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Radiation discipline grew stricter. At the nightly ceremonies, Obadiah handed out a doubled sacrament of chelates, and a thick paste he claimed was a mixture of radioprotectives. He brought a bowl of it to where Patrick was finishing off his latest dispatch.

Patrick eyed the mixture dubiously. "Esterhaszy told me that radioprotectives are almost useless."

"That so," the conjur man said. "Almost. You'd know all this shit if you came to my rituals."

"Well, something always seems to—" Patrick stopped. Looking up at the man he noticed for the first time that there were small filter plugs in Obadiah's nostrils. "I thought you said the spirit people protected you."

Obadiah looked puzzled, then figured it out and laughed. "Maybe I help them out a little."

Victoria no longer siphoned off blood from the pack animals. She drank from bloodbags dosed with dioxylate to inhibit clotting. They were traveling fast and light, letting the horses forage for their food.

Every night, after they made love, Patrick dreamed that Victoria sat up for hours, straining for a vision that never came.

They arrived at a place called Highspire, and camped within the walls of what had once been a roadside restaurant. Scratching about, several rebels found old orange tiles and lined their fires with them. While the two leaders conferred over a handful of century-and-a-half old government reports and layout charts, Obadiah explained to Patrick that they were just out of sight of the Meltdown reactor's cooling towers.

"So you're going through with it," Patrick said. "You're going to let that criminal kill hundreds of thousands of people."

"Hey, I done my best. I got a doctorate in massbehavioral psychology from Harvard, you know that? And I put everything into building up Victoria. In fact, I think I did a pretty good job, considering. But you saw the results—people just aren't willing to give up that big a chunk of their lives."

"There's still another alternative," Patrick said.

"Well, there's martyrdom." Obadiah shrugged. "Worked pretty well for Joan of Arc, as I recall. But something like that is pretty hard to arrange. Victoria might not want to volunteer for it."

"What I was thinking of," Patrick began testily. He stopped, lowered his voice. "I was thinking of assassination."

Obadiah looked surprised. "You going to kill Fitzgibbon?" He squinted at Patrick, shook his head. "Naw, you just want somebody to do it for you. Has it occurred to you that an assassin would probably die too? Now just who do you have in mind for the job?"

Just then Victoria and Fitzgibbon emerged from the tent, and Obadiah had to hurry off to assemble the nightly ghost shirt ceremony. *I could kill him myself,* Patrick thought. But listening to the words, he found he simply could not believe them. It was not just that he had never fired

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a gun in his life. It was that he was a neutral, an observer. His job was to bring back word of what occurred, not to interfere, not to shape the events himself.

"Just beyond those hills, just over that rise," Obadiah told his assembled congregation, "lies the Meltdown island!" He gestured with his rod, and the guerrillas stirred in collective unease. "Tomorrow we go there to walk among the atomic fires. We will walk among the broken buildings and the whole, and the killing gamma radiation will wash over us. The air be so full of boneseekers you choke on it, and the ground be so hot it blister the naked feet.

"But you will be protected."

The ragged band of rebels hung on Obadiah's every word, listening to what Patrick could only summarize as a cross between a science lecture and a pep talk. Beyond Obadiah, Victoria stood before her tent, pale and expressionless, hands by her sides. When the ceremony was over, she ducked under the flap and disappeared.

When Patrick joined her, Victoria was still and shivering. She smiled wanly and said, "Oh, hi," in a small voice.

"Hey," Patrick said, alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"Oh nothing, really. Just your basic panic reaction at going up to the Reactor, I guess. Any Drifter would feel it. I'll be okay."

But it was not the truth. Patrick could *feel* her evasiveness. "No, really." He hugged her shoulders, gently rocked her back and forth. "You can tell me, I'm okay."

Tears formed in her eyes and, when she blinked, ran quickly down her cheeks. She buried her face in his chest. "Oh God, Patrick, sometimes I worry that maybe I'm crazy."

Patrick said nothing, continued to rock her gently.

"Ever since I was a little girl, I've heard things and seen things that other people don't. Sometimes I get advice from . . . someone who's been dead for a long time. Sometimes she tells me things I don't want to do."

"Hush." Patrick kissed the top of her head, stroked her hair with one hand. He had been about to tell her that she wasn't crazy, that he had seen the world through her eyes, when she made that last statement. "What kind of things?"

"Dangerous things, sometimes. But she's always been right, so I've always done what she asked. But now . . . there's something she always told me I'd have to do, and I'm afraid. And I've begun to wonder if, if it's just that I'm crazy and all these visions were only hallucinations. The only time I've seen my mother appear in *years*, I was stoned flat on my ass." Her face was hard and tight. "Dammit, I don't want to die from craziness, I. . ."

"There, there," Patrick said. "Hush, little baby."

They made love awkwardly that night, and when Patrick finally fell asleep, he dreamed that the world was flooded with light.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The light was deep and blue and profound, and it burned right through the canvas sides of the tent, turning the things within into blurry and indeterminate shadows. It was not static light, but full of shifting emphases of focus and lumination. It washed through the tent restlessly, ceaselessly, like ocean water coursing through a tidepool.

He stood and pulled on a pair of trousers, put on a shirt. Barefoot, he padded out onto the grass.

Outside the light was a universal flood, wiping the stars from the sky, fading the moon into near-invisibility in its wash. It intensified to the southwest, at its source just beyond the hills, at the Meltdown site. The bright nuclear heart of the Reactor could be seen through the earth hills, piercing through rock and dirt.

The light was all a single living creature, and it gloried in its life. Dark and beautiful and menacing, it tugged at Patrick, pulling him toward the Reactor. The earth seemed to tilt up on its side, and it was hard to keep his feet, hard to keep from sliding away into the Reactor's maw.

A shadow passed before him then, cutting off the sensation of pull, and equilibrium was restored. It was a woman, but he couldn't make out her features, only that she was terribly, terribly sad. She was dark and fuzzy in the flood of light.

"Momma?" Victoria said in a small voice.

Patrick found himself back in the tent, blankets wrapped around him. The reassuring warmth of his love beside him was gone. Determinedly, he kept his eyes shut, maintaining the tenuous contact between himself and Victoria.

"Momma, I tried so hard to reach you. I don't know what to do."

The woman's face was an oval of pure light, glowing too brightly for the features within to be made out. Her shawl and dress *blazed* with colors like none Patrick had ever seen—glory reds and golds and sunshine yellows.

Then the Reactor's rays flared up, drowning the woman in cold, actinic blue light. Her clothes faded, bleaching away to sere dryness. The woman's bones shone through the cloth, and the light left her head.

She had no face. A dry white skull grinned down on her daughter.

Victoria cried out in alarm, and stumbled back. But her mother stepped forward, a skeleton in rags, to seize her hands. Bone fingers closed about her, and then took on flesh. Then there was flesh on the skull as well, and a face—an ordinary enough face, but the expression was filled with love and remembered pain. "It's nothing to be afraid of," she said. She hugged Victoria close, and for the first time it was obvious that she was a small woman, not nearly so tall as her daughter. And then Patrick slept.

But some short while after, he heard Victoria slip into the blankets with him, wriggle into a comfortable position, and murmur, "I had such a *nice* dream."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

The cooling towers of the defunct reactor loomed over the horizon as the rebels topped the first rise, and continued to grow as the band toiled forward, a frightening presence, unbroken and perfect. Higher the four towers rose into the sky, and higher. They were huge and impossibly out of scale. It was almost beyond belief that mere human beings had built such things.

The land was dead and barren from horizon to horizon. Gullies runneled the soil, leaving behind rocks and baked mud. In the rare puddle or stagnant pond there grew swathes of nameless scum, microorganisms too simple to be easily killed. An occasional clump of weeds poked out from the rubbled remains of a building, spread out, sickened and died.

Overhead, the sky was a clear and heartbreakingly pure blue.

They set up a work camp on the river shore opposite the island. The river between camp and island was almost gone. Before the Meltdown, a dam had connected island and shore, and with the shifting of currents a sand bar had grown there, with one swift channel cutting through.

Fitzgibbon led the first party of workers across. They wore radiation suits and brought hand-trucks with them. Laboriously they hauled the half-ton cannisters from the storage building to the island's edge. There, using ropes and donkey engines, the drums were pulled across the sand. At both sides, the cannisters were checked with geiger counters for radiation leakage. Several were abandoned.

Midway through the process, three trucks arrived, jouncing down an almost-obliterated roadway. They were driven by people Patrick had never seen before, and had "Quaker State Industrial Waste Disposal" painted on their sides. Patrick wondered where and how the rebels had gotten them.

Victoria was standing by the edge of the sand bar when Patrick approached her. She held the radiation suit's hood under one arm, and stared off at the dozens of buildings on the long, flat island. Many had been broken open by the steam explosion that had ruptured the reactor containment building. Others were relatively intact.

A light breeze lifted Victoria's hair, flew it behind her like white flame. "I hear you're leading the second crew across," Patrick said, and then in a familiar doubling of vision, he saw the world transformed through her eyes.

The sky over the island was a patchwork rainbow of soft pastels, yellows and roses swirling and merging slowly, one with the other, robin's egg blues flowing into muted golds so beautiful they took his breath away. The island below was all bright mist, shot through with dark flashes of color running along the building edges like St. Elmo's fire.

"It'll be a piece of cake," she said, and reached out awkwardly to hug him, the lead suit making her motions broad and slow. She kissed him with her eyes open, watching the rainbow sky reflected in his pupils, dancing in the tips of his lashes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then Patrick had stepped back, dazzled, and Victoria raised her hood and fit it over her head, the thick lead-glass visor cutting her vision down to a mere slit. Her crew was ready, and she led them silently across the sand bar.

It felt good to be alive. To feel her muscles working, to see the sand sparkle underfoot. The channel of water was invisible, and it almost undercut her balance when she stepped heavily into it. With a muffled laugh and a lurch, she righted herself, and kept on. The island ahead was a single, complex structure, though the details were lost in mist. For an instant the land, mist and buildings pulled together into a great, sleeping beast.

Obadiah slapped a hand on Patrick's shoulder. "Well, boy, tomorrow you get to file all your old dispatches intact and uncensored, eh?"

She was almost to the island now. Patrick tuned out his own surroundings, concentrated on the glowing line of brightly colored rocks that marked the end of the sand bar. "Obadiah, I've had some strange premonitions lately," he said carefully. "Maybe I've even seen Victoria's mother. What do you think it means?" There were only three steps to go. Two.

"Probably means you've had too much to smoke." Victoria's foot touched the island and the beast awoke. The shining white fog shifted, like the sides of an immense white bear fretfully preparing to emerge from hibernation. Deep blue spears of light shot up into the sky, and a great, silent roar boomed and echoed in her skull. Random emotions bounced up underfoot, died down. Then a huge, unfriendly sense of awareness focused on her.

"You all right there, brother man?"

"Just a little dizzy. Listen, I'm serious. I think I'm picking up on Victoria's psychic influences or something."

The crew stepped Indian-file along a roadway that no humans had trod on for over a century. Victoria led them into the beast, bypassing the worst of the radioactive rubble, stepping aside from the purple curtains of gamma radiation that sprayed from the broken containment buildings. All the while, she felt immersed in its cold, amused scrutiny.

"Psychic booshwah," Obadiah snorted. "Don't tell me you're becoming one of her believers?"

She was surrounded by buildings now. They loomed up on every side of her, and still they were overtopped by the cooling towers, hanging massive and oppressive over her head. Victoria led her crew along a long blank wall, then across a pile of rubble that had once been a building. The low rise that sparkled just beyond that had been an access road. Long tentacles of emerald green and cobalt blue light washed restlessly over them, daintily brushed against Victoria's suit.

"But I've seen it," Patrick objected. "I've seen things I couldn't possibly explain otherwise. There's no question but she's got some kind of powers."

"Here we are," Victoria said, and then realized that she could not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

possibly be heard outside her suit. She signaled for a halt, then waved her gang into the empty-fronted warehouse. They scattered to their work, moving quickly and efficiently. Night after night, they had practiced for this chore, and they were ready.

Standing alone before the warehouse, Victoria trembled. The canisters were lost within their own glow; she might as well be blind for all the help she could give. Still, she wished she could be in with her crew. Waiting outside, there was nothing to do but listen to the whispering of the Reactor.

A dark glee emanated from the Reactor. It wanted her, and she stood at the very fringe of its physical being. Wrapping tendrils lovingly about her arms and legs, it whispered *Come.* Victoria shivered again, and stood firm, her legs braced wide.

Obadiah sighed. "Well, okay," he said. "When I started with Victoria, I did some work with hypnosis and psychotomimetic drugs, and there were some suggestive results. Nothing definite, mind you, but enough to indicate that she might indeed have some sort of telepathic ability. But I had to give up that line of inquiry real fast."

"Why?"

The Reactor tugged at Victoria. It drew back the shining mist from the road before her, so that she could see the ancient roadbed as bright as burnished brass. The land tilted up behind her and down ahead, so that it was easiest to simply put one foot before the other and walk, lightly, quickly.

Nobody noticed her leave. The warehouse lost itself in the clutter of buildings, and Victoria glided toward the reactor containment building. It was huge, almost a third as high as the cooling towers, and it was as dazzling as a palace made of neon tubes.

"Why?" the conjur man said. "Because your girlfriend is none too tightly wrapped, if you'll forgive me for saying so. I don't think she's actually crazy, but—I been watching her for a long time, and it is my considered opinion that she is none too clear on where the line between fantasy and reality should be drawn."

A length of wall had collapsed on the containment building, swallowing up a slice of roof and whatever doorway might have existed. Twisted, half-melted girders stuck out through the gap. Within, a superheated vapor coiled about crumbling machinery, delicately veiling it from her eyes. And far beyond, visible only as a fierce red light piercing the mist, lay the Reactor's sister, the broken, simmering pool of the original Meltdown.

Am I not beautiful? the Reactor murmured. The blue-lit interior writhed in a slow cascade of shifting intensity. It looked warm, too, warm as the fires of Hell.

"She gets advice from her mother's spirit," Patrick said.

"I'm not surprised. Not only was her mother a famous mystic and healer, but she died when Victoria was an infant. She's grown up with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

everyone expecting her to fill her mother's shoes. It'd be more surprising if she didn't see her mother every now and then."

For all the lure of the Reactor, Victoria did not move. The building crouched anxiously over her, eager to wrap its hot touch about her body. The radioactive slurry within was hot, hotter than the surface of Venus. *Join me,* the Reactor said. She knew what it wanted, and what was expected of her, but still she resisted.

Victoria was afraid. She wanted a sign. It wasn't enough that her mother had told her time and again that she would come to this moment. Not when her last two visions had occurred in a drug delirium, and in a dream. She wanted proof that she was not mad.

Listening, waiting, straining for the least sign, Victoria thought she heard a voice, weak as a breath of wind on a still day, saying, "Go ahead."

Slowly, Victoria raised hands to her hood, preparing to lift it up. The fires leaped about her in anticipation, and her heart quailed. She could not make her hands move.

Victoria, don't! Patrick screamed mentally. He willed with all his might for the words to reach her.

Victoria stayed her hand, turned around, saw nothing. "Patrick?" she said. She reached out with her mind, felt him linked to her. "Patrick." And in that firm touch of minds she found corroboration that no, she was not mad at all, that her telepathic experiences—and hence also her spiritual—were real.

She took off her hood.

The fires roared up as she shrugged out of her lead suit. They lifted up her hair, sent it flying in the hot air. She kicked free of the leggings, let the suit drop to the ground. Hot needles lanced through her body, thousands of them, leaving long straight trails of ruptured cells. She advanced to the edge of the building.

Inside, the bubbling heat chuckled and gloated. It was time for their trade, time to consummate their bargain of life for power. For an instant Victoria looked upon the Reactor itself, gigantic masses of machinery that had slumped and crumbled over the decades, but still crouched protectively over a half-melted core of dying fuel rods, like a gigantic metal spider.

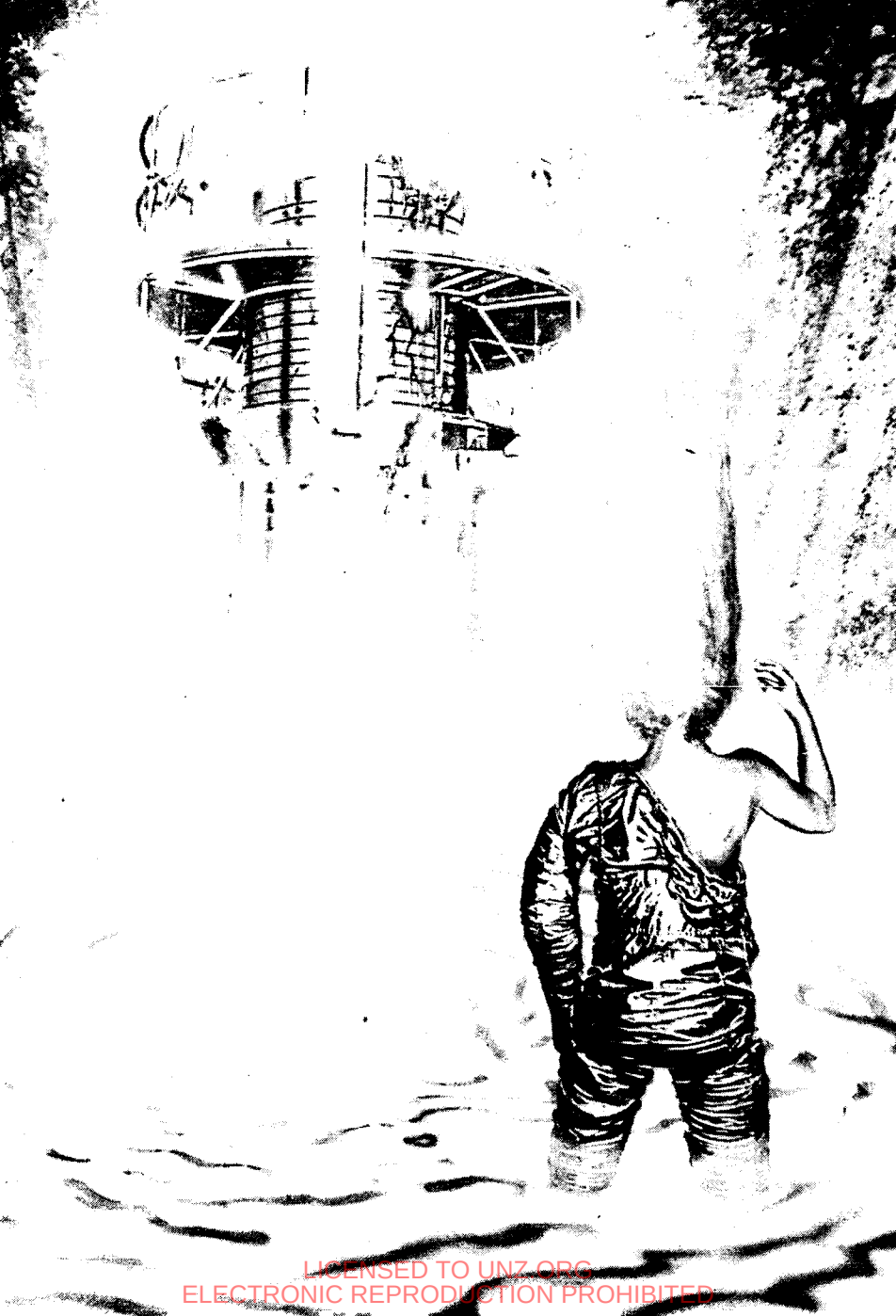
Looking in, Victoria felt the gamma radiation intensify, the invisible spears leaping up to pierce her again and again. And then the steam within the building shifted and the machinery faded away, and was replaced by a single enormous eye. It was lidded over by mist, but still the sullen red shone through, threatening and evil.

The eye opened and looked at her.

Patrick woke to find he had been laid across the supplies in the back of a four-wheeler. It was in motion. Crammed awkwardly in among the baggage, Obadiah crouched over him. "What happened?" Patrick asked.

"You had a seizure." Obadiah frowned. "Why didn't you warn me you were prone to fits?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I didn't know." Patrick sat up, looked around weakly. "Where's Victoria?"

"Lie back down. She's fine. She's at the head of the procession now. In charge of the whole damn thing."

"I thought. . ."

"About an hour ago, there was a small steam explosion on the island. Scared the holy shit out of everyone. Then Victoria come out. She was barefoot, not wearing her suit at all. Only had on a little white shift that she wore under the suit. No mask either. Come walking out as cool as you please, and she say the reactor done give her power. Then she ordered everybody saddled up and said we were going to take Honkeytonk again, and keep it this time. Nobody had the nerve to say boo to her."

"Jesus. They're really following her?"

Obadiah glanced around, lowered his voice. "Hell, if she don't die in the next day or two, *I'll* follow her. Back into the Meltdown reactor if she tell me to."

But just as the moon was rising over the naked hills, Victoria fell off her horse. The rebels milled about her uncertainly. She tried to stand up, lurched suddenly, and fell again. This time, several hands helped her up. Afoot again, she leaned her head against her horse's saddle for a moment before remounting.

They made camp late, and the next morning Victoria turned down the proffered goblet of blood. She quickly shook her head when it was brought her, and there was a queasy look on her face. Then she yanked off her mask, and disappeared into a nearby ravine. When she reappeared, there were flecks of vomit on her blouse.

Then a rebel assigned to monitoring the airwaves suddenly yanked off her earphones and said, "Corporation activity." With a swift bustle and clatter, the group began packing and mounting.

As Victoria wearily prepared to swing up onto her horse, Fitzgibbon rode up to her and said, "Don't bother."

Silently, Victoria looked up at him. The others fell silent, listening.

"The Corporation is on our tails, and we can't carry any excess baggage," Fitzgibbon said. "Look at you! You can't even ride without falling off."

"We could lash her to the horse," Obadiah suggested.

Fitzgibbon ignored him. "You've failed," he said harshly. "Admit it. You've got radiation poisoning and you're dying. Nobody is going to buy your little charade anymore." He glared about him. No one would meet his eye. "Nobody."

"It was just bad luck," Victoria said softly. "With this kind of exposure, there's usually a few weeks after the initial nausea before the sickness sets in again. Odds were I should've been able to pull it off." She handed the reins over to Fitzgibbon, backed away slowly. "Nothing but bad luck."

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Their possessions made a forlorn pile in the road—bloodbags, water, Patrick's transceiver, enough food for a week. They also had, if they wanted them, several collapsible cots and stools, cook-sets and shovels, all items lightened from the fleeing rebels' load. Obadiah pressed an old medical text into Patrick's hands, along with a syringe and morphine kit. "I've underlined the passage about morphine overdose—be real careful about that. It's easy and painless, so I hear." He clapped Patrick's shoulder. "Wouldn't want you to have any unfortunate accidents."

Fitzgibbon's horse cantered up at the last minute, and he leaned down to say. "Don't be stupid, boy. She'll be dead in a week, with or without you. You're not doing her any favors."

Patrick shook his head. "I owe her—" But Fitzgibbon, disgust plain on his face, did not stay to listen.

As the troupe rode away, several looked back over their shoulders. Obadiah glanced back frequently, and with obvious regret, but he went anyway. Heron, in contrast, shouldered her rifle and rode off stiff-backed, without once glancing back.

"Well," Patrick said. "Any idea what we do now?"

Victoria was lying on her back, eyes closed. "I don't know. I don't care. I'm just tired as shit." She began to cry.

Patrick found a development of townhouses, with the roofs and upper floors all collapsed. One had half its ground floor miraculously preserved, and he moved Victoria in there. The land was cleaner here, sparsely covered with stunted scrub, but still heavily enough laced with radioisotopes that there were no rats or other vermin to disturb them.

While Victoria lay on a cot by the door, Patrick busied himself cleaning out the room, and creating makeshift shutters for the windows and doorframe. Even these simple tasks were difficult without the right tools, and consumed a great deal of time.

Despite the constant toil, the next three days passed slowly, a cold, lonely nightmare, as Victoria sank deeper into her disease. She was weak and feverish, and Patrick applied wet cloths to her forehead as she twisted on her cot. Several times a day he would try spoon-feeding her blood. She did not always manage to keep it down.

Sometimes Victoria suffered from delirium, and then there was little Patrick could do but try to keep her from injuring herself as she raved and thrashed about. Halfway into these episodes, the hallucinations would begin to leak into his own mind, and he had to run outside, fleeing her presence, as the world filled up with monsters and demons, and he lashed out blindly, trying to destroy them.

Other times she had bloody diarrhea, messing her clothing and cot, as well as herself. Cursing himself for the part he had played in reducing her to this, Patrick cleaned it all up.

Once he heard a helicopter pass through the night, and thus knew that the Corporation Mummers were still in the area. Victoria had awoken

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then, convinced that he was going to feed her to some gigantic mutant insect, and she had to be restrained or she would have fled out the door and into the Drift. "My mother lied," she cried when she finally calmed down. "I was supposed to become a hero, and instead she sent me to Hell."

When he found time, Patrick typed out a full dispatch covering the events at the Meltdown island and beyond. It was written crisply and emotionlessly, as a kind of penance for how deeply involved he had become. Because he was in a state of constant exhaustion, he missed the polesat passing overhead, and filed it a day late.

On the third day, Esterhaszy knocked on the door.

Patrick had been sitting over Victoria, half dozing, when the dwarf appeared in the doorway. He stumbled to his feet, walking stiffly outside. The sunlight made him blink, and tears formed in his eyes.

"Don't bother explaining," Esterhaszy said. "I've already spoken with Fitzgibbon. How is she?"

"Sleeping." Patrick led his friend away from the door, to avoid disturbing Victoria. "How'd you find us?"

"It wasn't difficult. I knew Fitzgibbon's planned route, so when I finally decided I was wrong to abandon Victoria, he was easy enough to intercept. But how is she *doing?*"

"I think the fever has broken. But—well, the way this thing goes, there's a temporary remission after the first onslaught, which might last a week or two. But after that there's a relapse, and I'm afraid there's not really much hope for her."

"I know the symptomology of marrow death," Esterhaszy snapped. "I was just hoping that Fitzgibbon had told me wrong."

"Well, you—" Patrick stopped. There was a small noise from within the house. Victoria.

Inside, they found her awake. "Uncle Bob?" She took his hands. Tears were in her eyes. "Uncle Bob, my mother lied to me," she said in a little-girl voice. "She told me to go to the Reactor and offer up my life to it. She said that when I did that it would give me the power to drive the Corporation out of the Drift forever." An angry edge crept into her bewilderment. "God damn her, why did she lie?"

"Show a little spunk, child!" Esterhaszy growled. "I let you get away with blaming things on your mother for too long when you were little; I'm not about to let you start again. Don't try to foist off responsibility on someone else—straighten your shoulders, and make me proud of you."

They glared at one another for a long minute. Then her eyes fell. "Yes, Daddy," she said weakly, obediently. She closed her eyes, and her head lolled over to the side. "I'm tired," she said, and fell asleep again.

Now Esterhaszy stood motionless, still holding her hands. He bowed his head and tears fell silently. Finally, Patrick led him outside.

"Aw, jeez," the old man said. He took out a handkerchief, dabbed at his eyes, blew his nose, slid his mask into place. At last he said, "It's my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fault. I tried to get her off this obsession with occult crap. But I don't know. Maybe I was too strict. Maybe I wasn't strict enough."

"Maybe there was nothing you could have done."

"I should have been in control." Esterhaszy drew himself together. "She's going to die unless she gets bone marrow transplants. The odds aren't good, even with the transplants, but that's all the chance she has. And the only place she can possibly get that operation is in Boston."

Patrick shook his head at the hopelessness of the notion. But all he said was, "How do we get it for her?"

"We surrender to the Drift Corporation is what we do," Esterhaszy said, "and try to cut a deal."

"They'd want names—you'd be a traitor to your friends."

"What concern is it of yours? You goddamned neutral! You just stick to reporting the news; you're not supposed to take sides."

At that instant, something happened within the townhouse. Patrick knew it. He could feel it happening, could sense it by some means he could not have defined. It was as if the world had skipped a beat to let someone in. "Something odd is happening," he said dreamily. Victoria's mother was not far away. She stood in Victoria's presence, close enough for the rebel leader to touch.

"What do you mean, odd?" Esterhaszy asked.

"She's in the house!" Patrick spun about and ran.

But when they burst into the townhouse, Victoria was alone. She was sitting up in her cot, eyes bright and glittery. And when Patrick demanded to know what had just happened, she shook her head. "Nothing," she said, and Patrick knew she was lying.

"We've decided on a course of action," Esterhaszy said. But when he tried to explain, she brushed it aside. "What are my chances, even if everything goes the way you want—slim, eh? Practically nonexistent, aren't they?"

Esterhaszy frowned. "I wouldn't go so far as to say—"

"For as long as I can remember, I've known I'd die young. I'm not afraid of it anymore." She took Patrick's hand, squeezed it. "I'm afraid I'm shameless, Patrick. When I needed publicity, I let you become an outlaw, and when I needed a . . . friend, I kept my secrets from you. There's no reason in the world for you to forgive me anything. But I still have one more favor to ask. I need your help. Will you give it?"

Patrick looked down at her thin hand in his, so much weaker than a few days ago. The practical side of his mind knew he shouldn't make any blind promises. But the honest side knew that it didn't matter what she asked. "Anything," he said.

She told him what she wanted.

It took only minutes to vacate the townhouse. Patrick helped Victoria outside while Esterhaszy piled up flammables. He built the fire quickly and competently, first tinder, then kindling, then planking, then wall. "Stand clear!" he yelled, lit a match, and torched the building.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As the smoke billowed upward, Patrick pulled out the whip antenna on his transceiver. It was far too early for a polesat transmission, but the Corporation might be listening anyway. He began typing.

Esterhaszy brought around his motortrike, a converted Citicab with roll bar and balloon tires, and parked it with the motor running. He slapped a hand on Patrick's back in passing, and went to the ancient truncated lamp post, where Victoria sat huddled in a light blanket. "Well," he said.

"You have the envelope?"

"Right here." Esterhaszy slapped his shirt pocket. "Though I don't believe for an instant this fool scheme is going to work."

"Piotrowicz loves his city. It's all he's got left," Victoria said. "I guess—"

"Don't say anything. I don't think I could stand it; I'd start crying." Esterhaszy forced a smile. "And we don't want your old uncle to cry, do we now?"

Victoria shook her head. "No."

"All right then." He turned away.

But before he got halfway to his vehicle, Victoria was on her feet, and running to him. She hugged him from behind, getting down on her knees to do so, and hooked her chin over his shoulder, buried the side of her face into his neck.

"Now don't," the old man said. He patted her arm, then began to stroke it. "Oh, hell."

An hour later a Mummer patrol showed up, three fast all-terrain vehicles with armed Corporation Mummers holding their weapons ready. They found two beaten figures huddled under a makeshift white flag of surrender.

The jail in Honkeytonk was nothing special—a rehabbed brick rowhouse with bars set across the windows, and padlocks and peepholes added to the interior doors. But it sufficed to hold the new prisoners. They had been in custody only an hour when a guard unlocked the door and Keith Piotrowicz walked in.

Even though Patrick had only seen Piotrowicz once, and then briefly, it was still a shock how the man had aged. The flesh on his face was loose and sunken, and his motions abrupt and graceless. But he still retained an aura of power.

Piotrowicz slammed a handful of papers down on the table with a peremptory thump. Patrick recognized a fragment of prose on the top sheet. They were pirated hardcopies of his dispatches.

"Just in by packet boat," Piotrowicz said. He jerked a folded copy of the *Atlanta Federalist* from under his arm and thrust it at Patrick.

The paper contained one of Patrick's early dispatches. They'd put it on the front page, a full column in a sidebar running down the left-hand side, and continued within. A quick glance showed that the editing had been light; most of his prose had been let stand. Patrick put the paper down. Once it would have meant a great deal to him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Piotrowicz took a chair, studied his two captives from under bushy eyebrows. "Well. Shall we talk?"

"Let's not waste time," Victoria said. "You're concerned about the fact that a fanatic like Fitzgibbon has a battery of missiles and enough radioactives to dust Boston four times over." Idly, she drew the top sheet from the pile of dispatches, and flipped it over.

Piotrowicz nodded slowly.

"You're not going to catch him. So you want to know, does he really have the radioactives? Can he really use them as a weapon? Will he?" Among the possessions the guards had let her keep was a charcoal stick. She drew it from her pocket now, and began doodling.

"Well?"

"You bet your ass he will." Victoria glanced up, flashed a quick grin. Her gums were bleeding lightly. "You just bet your sweet little ass."

Keith glanced darkly at Patrick, then back at the rebel leader. "You will both be tried as war criminals," he said. "You are both accomplices to the act, and you will pay. Crimes committed against civilian populations are not acts of war, and need not be treated as such." He paused, rubbed his forehead wearily. "I knew your mother," he said to Victoria.

If his intention was to startle her, it failed. All of Victoria's attention was on the paper before her. Her brow furled slightly in concentration. The blanket slipped from her shoulder, and she drew it back without looking. "Oh, yes?" she said.

"She had a lot of grit," Keith said. "And people believed in her. We could have accomplished a lot together. But she fell prey to a kind of false sentimentality. You can't help people out of weakness. It's damned hard to help people at all, but you can't do it without strength. Even then, the best you can usually do is to minimize the pain." He glared at Victoria. "What do you imagine your mother would say about this plan to kill everyone in Boston? How would you justify it to her? Do you think she'd approve?"

"Pull your troops out of the Drift," Victoria said.

Piotrowicz blinked. "What?"

Victoria bent over her paper again. "Pull your forces out. Move out all the Corporation Mummers, your spies and agents and informers, your overseers and executives and officers. Everyone. That's the only way you can stop Fitzgibbon."

Slowly, Piotrowicz began to laugh. The laughter built. He leaned forward and then back, rocking helplessly in his chair. "My dear, my dear," he said at last. "It's not as easy as you make it sound. I don't have that kind of power." He sobered a bit, went on. "There are things which must be done, you see. There are unpleasant decisions which someone has to make. Someone has to personally decide to start this war, order that execution, abandon that faithful ally to the wolves. And the man willing to make those decisions is given the power to see that they are carried out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But he only has the power to make those particular decisions—he can't decide contrary to the interests of those he represents. If he tries to avoid that war, that execution, the loss of that faithful ally, then the power goes to the next man willing to make those decisions.

"*I* can't pull the Corporation out of the Drift. Too much money is involved. Those who reap the benefit of the Corporation will simply refuse to believe that Fitzgibbon isn't bluffing. If I move against their interests, they'll simply replace me."

"Maybe so," Patrick said. "But you could still lose the war. It wouldn't be at all hard for a man of your ability."

"I concede the point." Keith spread his hands wide. "I could—if I wanted—fight so bad a war as to leave your forces in a winning position. But why should I? Even if I were totally convinced that Fitzgibbon can actually deliver on his threat—Boston isn't my city. Let him destroy Boston, and then I'll negotiate. But only to save Philadelphia, not because I care diddly-squat about some jerkwater metropolis in the Greenstate."

"Ah," Victoria said. She looked down on her paper with satisfaction. She had to hold herself upright with one hand, but still the map she had drawn was neat and tidy. "Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt. Please go on." She began writing small numbers on the map, distributing them in a grid-like pattern.

Keith looked annoyed. "Tell me the location of the lab where the radioactives are to be processed. You can't bluff me, and you've got nothing to buy with. If you want to stop Fitzgibbon, the burden is on yourself."

"Fitzgibbon left me to die," Victoria said. "He knew that I might live long enough to talk with you, but he didn't bother to shoot me. I have not the faintest idea in Hell where he plans to process the radioactives." She finished the numbers, drew a series of long, looping lines. "Here." She handed the map to Piotrowicz.

"What's this?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's a map. There's Philadelphia down in the corner; you see where the rivers come together? And the numbers are radiation counts, and if you connect them up, it ought to be fairly obvious to anyone that Philadelphia actually lies inside the Drift. Not outside, like almost everyone believes. Inside."

"Where did you get this?" Keith cried, horrified.

"What does it matter where I got it? Your question is, does anybody else know about it?"

"Yes." Keith whispered the word.

"An identical copy of this map is in the hands of my uncle. You may even know him—Robert Esterhaszy? He certainly remembers you."

"The dwarf," Piotrowicz said. Then, "What is it you want?"

But when she told him, he shook his head. "No, I won't do it." He stood and walked to the barred window. It was bright outside, and the street was empty. At last he said, "I've done a lot of dirt in my time, and gotten damned little for it in return. Why should I even bother?" When nobody answered, he said, "Damn it, what's in it for me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nothing." Already Victoria was tiring; the effort she put into holding herself upright made her tremble. "Remember what you said about power. There's only one decision you can make, isn't there? You have the power—and you have to make the decision."

It was noon. People had been gathering in Honkeytonk all day. They thronged the center square—every Drift Corporation employee and indentured colonist that Piotrowicz could order to attend, every Drifter laborer that his Corporation Mummers could march in to watch.

"Supposedly they're all here because I want to teach them an object lesson," Piotrowicz said sourly. He pushed his mask down and spat, working his mouth in an ugly way to do so. "This is what my life comes to. My own people hate me already." He handed Patrick his transceiver. Battered and familiar, the leather scarred and cracking at the edges, it was an old and faithful friend refound. He ran a hand over its surface.

"Break their hearts," Piotrowicz said.

He started to walk away, then returned. "I must be getting senile—I forgot to give you this." He handed Patrick a folded document, then headed for the reviewing stand.

In the center of the square, stackwood had been piled high around a tall, upright pole. Mummers were soaking the pile with coal oil.

Opposite Patrick, almost in a line with the stake, Victoria stood straight and poised in a long, white dress. She was held in an open wooden cage, and guards kept the crowd at a distance. No one could get close enough to see how she had been dosed with painkillers to preserve the illusion of cool, proud defiance.

Already a few scattered individuals were casting glances his way. Informing each other that *there* was the Southern traitor who had turned in Victoria Paine.

Patrick looked down at the pardon in his hand, thought back to what Victoria had told him—years ago, it seemed—in the townhouse. "They'll hate you for it. Your name will be a curse for centuries to come in this part of the world, if we work this right." She had smiled through her pain then, shrugged and said, "Still, every martyr needs her Judas."

There was an ironic resonance to that thought, and Patrick discovered Victoria's presence inside his head again. He looked up and saw her smiling blearily at him across the square. His joints ached in sympathetic pain. He felt the irons about her wrists. She was straining to reach him; he could feel the effort reflected in her body—the tension up the side of her neck, the involuntary tremble of a muscle in her cheek. Until finally, as if from a great distance he thought he heard what might have been the merest echo of her whispered voice. The words evaded him, but the meaning did not. It was a goodbye.

It hit him then—and not for the first time—that all might fail, their plans and schemes, everything. Would the people of the Drift actually rally to the memory of a dead martyr? Here and now, with the dirt hard

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and real underfoot, with the sun hot on his head and harsh to his eyes . . . he could not believe. They were about to burn Victoria alive, and all for an abstraction, something intangible and theoretical.

A hand balled itself into a fist, unclenched. There was nothing he could do.

The charges were being read. Treason, sedition, subversion—more abstracts. Something about vampirism. It seemed to go on forever. After a time, Victoria found her eyes drooping. There came a flash of vision then, from Patrick to her and back, and she saw herself in the dock. She was tall and proud and in his eyes she was beautiful, as beautiful as a flame. A light breeze whipped her hair up, twisting and soaring, as if she were burning already.

Victoria straightened, suppressing a smile. The breeze felt good on her skin.

The smell of coal oil was pungent. Patrick wanted to look away and never look back. He wanted to break the link between himself and Victoria, wanted to kneel in the dirt and vomit up all the poisonous memories from his body. Tears began streaming down his face, and he couldn't for the life of him imagine where they came from.

Piotrowicz mounted the reviewing stand. Even from the far fringes of the crowd, Patrick could see how the other officials edged away from the old man. A guard standing by Victoria, and seen by no other eyes, made the sign of the horns at Piotrowicz, to ward off evil. The old Mummer stood in the eye of the crowd's gathering hate, as if oblivious to it.

He flapped a hand impatiently for the show to begin.

Victoria's hands were uncuffed, and she was jerked roughly out from the dock. She stumbled, and recovered easily enough, but she stubbed a toe in doing so, and the pain was annoyingly distracting. There was old straw ground into the earth underfoot. She noticed a child with mask askew, and her fingers ached to straighten it.

A set of wooden steps ran up the stackwood. The guards—one to each arm—allowed her to mount the stairs slowly, with some dignity, though the one to the left seemed anxious to get it over with. He tugged at her lightly, involuntarily, as they climbed. There was an awkward moment as the cuffs were relocked behind her, so that she was chained to the stake. Then the steps were removed, and she stood atop the pyre, alone.

The view was good from up there. The colors were bright and clear; she could pick out Patrick's brown eyes from among the thousands that stared up at her. Tears dimmed Patrick's vision, and she washed away, only to be replaced again by the view from her own eyes.

It was strange. Standing there, knowing how little time she had left, she loved them all, from Patrick on down. She would have been perfectly happy if this moment could be frozen so that she stood looking at them all forever.

A hooded man appeared from nowhere, brandishing a smoky torch. He whirled it three times about his head, threw.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It arched toward the wood.

Esterhaszy should not have been present. Indeed, their entire scheme would fall apart if Piotrowicz were to spot him. But the dwarf was in among the crowd, and Patrick glimpsed him at the front, among the people who had to be held back by a line of Mummers. Victoria saw him, white-faced and taut, straining as close as he could get to the fire. And when the torch landed at her foot, touched the wood, he screamed before the flames could even reach her.

The first flame touched Victoria, licked the front of her dress. Patrick flinched but did not close his eyes.

The pain was liquid, and it ran right through Victoria, pushing aside the painkillers as if they did not exist, searing through to the marrow of her bones. But she did not forget her duty. Blood trickled down Patrick's chin; he had bitten through his tongue.

"Freedom!" Victoria screamed as the flames wrapped themselves lovingly about her. "Rise up!"

The air was hot. The fever of summer had reached a peak, and was about to break. Autumn was almost upon them.

It was nearly harvest time. ●

MARTIN GARDNER

(from page 133)

SECOND SOLUTION TO IT'S ALL DONE WITH MIRRORS

Words consisting entirely of letters that are symmetrical with respect to a horizontal axis passing through their middles will not be altered when turned upside down and held up to a mirror. Only letters that are not the same above and below the axis will be changed. If you examine all the letters in the false statement, and imagine a horizontal line passing through the middle of the words, you will see that each letter has this kind of symmetry.

Letters with left-right symmetry (rather than top-bottom symmetry) are unchanged by a mirror if you hold them in front of the glass without turning them upside down. For example, if you print the word *automata* like this:

A
U
T
O
M
A
T
A

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and hold it up to a mirror without inverting it, it will be unchanged in the glass.

If the topic of symmetry and its relation to the alphabet intrigues you, let me recommend Scott Kim's beautiful book *Inversions*. It is available in paperback, published in 1981 by Byte Books. Kim's clever calligraphy is as astonishing as good magic. To honor the Christmas season, Figure

Figure 1

1 shows two ways that Kim has lettered "Merry Christmas." The first has left-right symmetry and is unchanged when held in front of a mirror. The second has top-down symmetry, which you can prove by turning the page upside down and looking at its mirror reflection.

Now for a final question that I will leave unanswered so you and your friends can have the pleasure of debating it. Why does an ordinary mirror reverse only the left and right sides of things, never the tops and bottoms? It is hard to believe, but serious papers discussing this trivial question have actually been published in journals of philosophy!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

West of Eden
By Harry Harrison
Bantam, $15.95

Would *you* contradict Philip Jose Farmer, Joe Haldeman, Norman Spinrad, Ben Bova, Hal Clement, Brian Aldiss, Jerry Pournelle, Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Gordon Dickson, and A.E. Van Vogt? The advance reading copy of Harry Harrison's *West of Eden* came with pages of rave comment quotes from these and other authors (all male, curiously enough), and while I'm sure the main intent was not to intimidate poor reviewers of little fame, it had that effect. How could one such take exception to this avalanche of expertise?

The novel has that look of *epic*, and in a way it is. Harrison postulates an alternate Earth in which the meteorological catastrophe which theoretically put an end to the dinosaurs did not happen. So the saurians developed intelligence and inherited the world—or at least the Old World. But sneaky humankind went ahead and emerged in the Americas, though kept to the minimum culturally by the constant battle against the unintelligent dinosaurs which overran the Southern climes, confining the humans to a nomadic hunting existence in the North.

But an incipient Ice Age throws both races a curve. The intelligent reptiles (who, like their relatives, find warmth necessary for any sort of activity) have developed their civilization around the Mediterranean, which is cooling down. So, like all sensible folk, they head for Florida.

Their culture is immensely old at this point, and conservative rather than static. They do not use fire, and their "machines" and tools are genetically manipulated living things; ships, guns, handcuffs, cameras are all creatures.

They start their colony in the New World by planting a city—literally. But in the meantime, hungry bands of human hunters are heading south, braving the brainless saurians out of desperation since the cold is wreaking havoc with their hunting.

When the two races meet, it is hate at first sight, an immediate antipathy of species. *West of Eden* chronicles the first decade or so of this unfortunate racial strife, in particular being the story of the boychild Kerrick, the first human to be captured by the saurian Yilanè, and raised and studied by them. He almost forgets his primitive human heritage, but when he takes part in killing parties sent by the Yilanè against the humans, the memories return, he escapes,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and leads the resistance, uniting the scattered tribes of the North in the process.

Harrison has created the Yilanè culture in exhaustive detail, but it is an intellectual creation. The very nature of the sapient descendants of dinosaurs implies cold-bloodedness and this may be why this created culture doesn't grab the reader. (There is an attempt to make the Yilanè a bit more approachable by including a minority who are humanistic—no, that's the wrong word—well, the reptilian equivalent of humanistic, but they are despised by the majority of their race.) But even the human characters and cultures stir little warmth, and at times one finds oneself thinking "a plague on both your races."

I think it boils down to the fact that Harrison has always been a rather "intellectual" writer, not particularly adept at involving the reader on an emotional or dramatic level. While *West of Eden* is a good deal more substantial than most of his work, this still applies. However, within those limitations, this is all one could ask in the way of an intelligent and action-packed clash-of-alien-races novel.

So, Messrs. Farmer, Haldeman, Zelazny et al., I've mentioned your opinions, and not contradicted them totally. I'm not *that* crazy.

Those Who Favor Fire
By Marta Randall
Pocket Books, $3.50 (paper).

There's nothing like a good disaster to liven one's spirits. *Fictional* disaster, that is. The popular young writer, Marta Randall, has given us a survival-among-the-ruins story, a subgenre that is very big these days. (It's been fascinating to watch it revive—five years ago almost none was being published; now there are whole *series* devoted to the theme.) However, hers has enough differences to avoid being just another disaster clone.

Those Who Favor Fire, for instance, actually has a point aside from the graphic chronicling of looting, murder, rapine, and general unpleasantness which seems to be the *raison d'etre* for much of the current crop. There are more than a few characters in the book who, in the face of disaster, are willing to retain or regain civilized values, and have the courage and ability to do so. (Whether this makes the novel a fantasy depends on your opinion of contemporary culture, of course.)

Also, there's the disaster itself, which is not the presently fashionable nuclear holocaust, but the perhaps even more likely California earthquake (I said *perhaps*), all the fault of San Andreas. Novels of natural disaster are usually only marginally speculative fiction; Randall adds the necessary SF element by setting it in the near future. This is fortified by interrupting the (pre-earthquake) action periodically with groups of news stories concerning the worsening world scene, terrorism, shortages, and escalating crime and brutality ("Mutant wheat virus feared loose in Kansas"; "Saudis slash US oil shipments"; "Neo-Nazi nuclear blast destroys Bonn"). These emphasize the growing disgust and disillusion of the protagonist, a female doctor, with urban living in general.

The greater percentage of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

novel is devoted to several groups of San Francisco residents. There is the doctor, her ex-gun-runner lover, and their friends; a cadre of fire-breathing survivalists expecting—in fact, downright anticipating —the worst; a Manson-type cult masquerading as a drug-rehab center; and a paramilitary gang similar to the Guardian Angels and its idealistic Hispanic leader (rather rosily portrayed—the only really naïve touch in the book). These circles are all coincidentally linked by various arbitrary acquaintanceships.

Elizabeth Gracey, the doctor, finally gives up on dedication after one horrifying incident after another at the hospital where she works. She initially thinks of joining the survivalists, but is turned off by their almost ghoulish desire for the disaster (of whatever kind) to arrive, and decides to try a more positive approach, working to set up a self-sufficient farm near a small town at some distance from the city.

Then comes the big quake, and San Francisco is reduced to Frisco in a few moments. Inevitably all the circles come together, heading toward Elizabeth's farm—who will survive?

Those Who Favor Fire is a thoughtful novel that is anything but short on action. Even better, it opts for civilized values.

Archer's Goon
By Diana Wynne Jones
Greenwillow, $10.50
Power of Three
Diana Wynn Jones
Tempo $2.25

Diana Wynne Jones writes some of the quirkiest, most original fantasies around, and why she is not more popular in this country (she's English) is a mystery, though I have a theory ("Wouldn't he?" I can hear the reader sigh). Her fantasies are published here as juveniles, though their quirkiness and originality can really only be appreciated by adults (children *can* have fun with them in other ways, let me hasten to add). This is in sharp contrast to all the fantasies being published ostensibly for adults these days, the sophistication level of which would make a self-respecting adolescent yawn.

Ms. Jones does not give us addlepated magicians or cutesy unicorns, and you won't find a dragon (endearing *or* villainous) on the covers of her books. What you *will* find inside is always surprising, not only in respect to other authors, but to her previous work—her novels are never quite like the previous ones.

Her latest, *Archer's Goon*, is predictable only in that it's outrageously unlike anything else. It might be considered whimsy, but in this country, at least, whimsy is connected with *cute* and there's nothing cute about it (though it's very funny in places). Quentin Sykes is an author living in a small town; thirteen years ago, to break a writer's block, he agreed to send a friend 2000 words a month, on any nonsensical subject. It worked, and to insure its success, Quentin has been sending 2000 words monthly since. He paid no attention to his friend's facetious threat of turning off his water and electricity if he failed to send in the wordage (friend Montjoy works at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Town Hall), though he thought it odd when several years ago he was late, and the power did indeed go off.

One day Quentin's family (wife and two children) come home to find a goon waiting for them, a great lout of a person who says that this month's 2000 words has not arrived, and that he has been sent by Archer to get it, or else. Who is Archer? It seems that the town in which he lives is run by seven siblings, each of whom "farms" an area of endeavor ("to farm" means to profit from and direct, both) such as education (farmed by Venturus), crime (farmed by the truly awful Shine), music (by Torquil), and so on. The seven are all at odds with each other. "This town is run by seven megalomaniac magicians," as Quentin puts it, since all the sibs seem to have extraordinary powers.

Archer is the brother who farms power, and he is the one who has been receiving the 2000 words (or has he?) which seem of great importance to the whole family. In any case, they are all out to get the current (overdue) batch, and the Sykes family is besieged by their powers. Thanks to Torquil, the radio, TV, and every musical instrument in the house will not stop playing. A huge overdue tax bill arrives, obviously from Hathaway, who farms records and archives (and roads—their street is subjected to jackhammers all day every day). Hathaway is particularly hard to get to, since he lives in the past—literally. All of the siblings are eventually tracked down by Quentin and his family, save for the mysterious Venturus. Where is he? What does Archer's goon have to do with it all?

There is no communicating in a brief outline how ingenious, funny, and slightly frightening all this is. (I was reminded initially of C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* with its setting of a perfectly ordinary modern milieu with very strange things stirring under the surface.) The complications, ramifications, and surprises are endless. It is Ms. Jones's particular talent to take a completely mad plot idea such as this, and by telling it absolutely seriously, have it make complete and intriguing sense. *Archer's Goon* is a very special book, not to all tastes; but for those who can tune in to this kind of fantasy, it's sensational.

There is also the first U.S. paperback publication of Jones's *Power of Three* which might be considered a more ordinary novel, but only relatively. It concerns a hunting and gathering tribe with vaguely Celtic overtones (hammered gold torcs and names such as Og and Gair). They live on a vast and marshy moor, and have some magic, particularly inherited "Gifts" of sight and finding. It is some way through the story that the reader begins to realize that this is a tribe of elves (that's the kind of thing I *hate* to give away, but the review would make no sense without it) living in a deserted area of contemporary England. They are not your common, garden-variety elves (though they do live in mounds), and their culture and encounters with the modern world are marvelously conceived.

Ms. Jones, you're beautiful.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eye of the Comet
By Pamela Sargent
Harper & Row, $7.95 (paper)

Riding a comet has been a pretty neglected theme in SF since M. Verne took his excursion in the last century (complete with ice skating, no less). Now Pamela Sargent has revived it in a YA (young adult) book. Needless to say, her conception is not quite so naïve as Verne's; the small worlds in *Eye of the Comet* have been made thoroughly habitable by a sort of terraforming which involves huge trees, the root systems of which form the cliffs and valleys in which the inhabitants live.

And live very well, too. The comet colonies of Earth are idyllic communities which span interstellar space, and are run by computer minds who take the worry out of everything; the humans aboard dress casually and indulge their hobbies. But nobody ever goes near old Earth, from which the comet-dwellers have fled centuries ago. The diaspora was caused by a man-made catastrophe, a wholesale madness brought on by machines designed to enhance mankind's psychokinetic powers.

The refugees were those lacking in any psi powers; the pathetic remnant on Earth returned to the primitive, but kept their mental talents, thoroughly mixed with superstition. The machines remained operative but inert, probably in contact with the artificial minds that rule the comet Utopias.

Young Lydee, a comet dweller, knows she was not born on her world, but it comes as a nasty shock to find out she's really from Earth; it seems that there had been an abortive visit some years back and she had been brought back from there as an infant, saved from being killed as are all children without psi talents. Now Homesmind, her world's computer, is sending her back, in hopes of making permanent contact with Earth's humans.

Unfortunately, *Eye of the Comet* is written in that peculiarly awkward style which editors seem to think is suitable for adolescents. The prose is stiff, the ideas fuzzily presented. Sargent, in her adult novels, has proved herself a writer of sensitivity and imagination, particularly good at characterization, so one can only judge that writing for the YA market (mostly libraries, I gather) requires this sort of adaptation, which is too bad. Lydee's struggles to adapt to Earth (they eat real vegetable matter and meat, and things get dirty!) and the rather vapid moral decisions she's forced to come to have the quality of all those girls' books in which the adolescent heroine from the Big City is forced into a rural existence, and finally comes to terms with dirt and (in this case) telepathy.

Bridge of Birds
By Barry Hughart
St. Martin's Press, $13.95

Take a Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser story; age the Mouser to about 90 years and turn him into a Chinese sage; Orientalize Fafhrd also but keep the muscles and brainpower (lack of). Lay the whole thing in a mythical 7th century China with the landscapes of a willow pattern plate. There you have the basic atmosphere of Barry

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hughart's peculiar fantasy, *Bridge of Birds*. But there's more to it than that.

Cute chinoiserie is usually not my cup of oolong; Kai Lung and his golden hours tend to give me dyspepsia. (Dr. Lao, however, is another kettle of shrimp lo mein.) So there was an intimation of heartburn when the cover of Hughart's book announced that it was "a novel of an ancient China that never was." And I nearly gave up when a character known as Auntie Hua was introduced on page 2. I'm sure the Chinese language has a perfectly good word for aunt, so why must every parent's sister in every Chinese pastiche be known as "Auntie" whatever?

But sticking with it paid off. For about a third of the novel, there is a strong resemblance to Leiber's satiric fantasies, as the ancient but mischievous sage, Li Kao, galumphs around mythical China with the none-too-bright, musclebound Number Ten Ox, seeking the Great Root of Power (a sort of super ginseng) to arouse the children of Ox's village, who have fallen into a trance from eating poisoned mulberry leaves (intended for the silkworms, of course).

But after encountering, as Li Kao puts it, "an evil duke who reads minds and laughs at axes, treasure troves that are hidden in labyrinths guarded by monsters, flutes that tell fairy tales, an incomprehensible ghost who might have come from one, an ancient children's game, and a ghostly message from Dragon's Pillow," the sage begins to see a pattern, and what seems to be a series of whimsical adventures becomes part of a great scheme—or game, if you will—directed by the Emperor of Heaven himself, concerning the affairs of the Gods of the Chinese pantheon.

So the giddy adventures, the miraculous escapes from dungeons and dragons (no connection with the Occidental game of the same name), and the continuing encounters with minor characters who reappear at the most unlikely times and places, continue. But they transcend the stuff of whimsical legend to become a tightly woven puzzle novel with a stream of delightful invention that never stops. Li Kao sums it up by telling Ox that "you and I are wandering blindfold through a myth devised by a maniac" that leads them into "the landscape of a homicidal fairy tale."

There may still be a few too many examples of the overkill of Chinese nomenclature—a move in the Sword dance is "Eighth Drake Under the River Bridge," a street the "Alley of Four Hundred Forbidden Delights," not to mention the "Hundred Ingredients Perfume of the Heavenly Spirits who Descended in the Rain Shower." On the other hand, Li Kao delivers some delightful words of wisdom that are *not* variations on Confucius Say, such as, "Nothing on the face of the earth—and I do mean nothing—is half so dangerous as a children's story that happens to be real," and "The supernatural can be very annoying until one finds the key that transforms it into science," not to mention the Sixty Sequential Sacrileges with which he had won the all-China Freestyle Blasphemy contest.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Add to all this a giant invisible hand that guards a lost city (that turns out to be merely a giant invisible spider when coated with lava), an unlikely heroine who is downright ugly until she grins, the supernatural Queen of Ginseng, and an apotheosis in which the Princess of Birds arises to Heaven on a bridge made by the billion birds of China to rejoin her lover, the Shepherd of the Stars. Barry Hughart has taken the stuff of exotic myth and legend, and treated a stylish, witty, and offbeat (if not downright off the wall) fantasy novel. *Somebody's* still being original out there.

Shoptalk . . . The Door Into Shadow, a sequel to Diane Duane's interesting fantasy, *The Door Into Fire*, was recently published with two strikes against it. One was that it appeared in trade (oversized) paperback; the other was that the first book had been out of print for some time. The latter problem has been remedied with *Fire's* reappearance (Bluejay, $7.95, paper). Presumably they will both appear in regular paperback eventually . . . As I've pointed out before, an area in which this reviewer does not feel knowledgeable enough to pass judgement is poetry. But the appearance of any volume devoted to "poetry of science and the fantastic" certainly deserves mention, since they are few and far between. Such is the subtitle of *Burning With a Vision* edited by Robert Frazier. The writers include Nancy Springer, Gene Wolfe, Roger Zelazny, Ursula K. Le Guin, Suzette Haden Elgin, Philip Jose Farmer, Thomas M. Disch, Edward Bryant, Michael Bishop, and Brian Aldiss. Sources range from this magazine to *The Times Literary Supplement.* If you feel that poetry is *terra incognita*, give it a try. How can any fantasy lover fail to respond to Le Guin's "I am the dragon's daughter/ smokeborn of broken shell/ I am the winged the broken child/ I fly and do not fall." Or an SF person to Bruce Boston's "In the back streets of a starport city/the drifter waits out the short years/with assorted otherworldly cronies/and an occasional native concubine." (Owlswick Press, $14.75 hard cover, $8.75 paperback.)

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov Presents the Best Science Fiction Firsts* co-edited by Isaac Asimov, Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg (Beaufort Books, $17.95); *Puzzles from Other Worlds* (A collection of puzzles previously published in *IAsfm)* by Martin Gardner. (Vintage Paperbacks, $5.95); *Isaac Asimov's Tomorrow's Voices* collected by the editors of *IAsfm* (Dial Press, $12.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKET PLACE

ISAAC ASIMOV — is published 13 times a year. The rate for CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS is $2.20 per word — payable in advance — minimum ad $33.00. Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

ART

SF, Fantasy, Space, and Movie Posters. Many rare items. Giant new picture catalog $1.00. Space Station, Studio A, 33 Bacon St., Watertown, Mass 02172.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

SCIENCE Fiction/fantasy. Free catalog of pulps, digests, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections also purchased. Ray Bowman, Box 5845A, Toledo, Ohio 43613.

MISCELLANEOUS

OLDTIME radio programs. Suspense, drama, science fiction, comedies. Highly enjoyable tapes. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Route One, New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

TERMPAPER catalog—306 pages—15,278 papers available—all levels. Rush $2.00. RESEARCH, 11322 Idaho, #206AV, Los Angeles, 90025. (213) 477-8226.

"FREE SPACE publications—Shuttle, Apollo, etc., are sent out by Gov't agencies and corporations. For a listing of addresses, send $2.00 US and a S.A. letter to: Moriarty Enterprises, P.O. Box 504, Barrie, Ontario L4M 4T7.

MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing Mail! Free Supplies, Postage! No Selling! No Running Ads! Information? Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-SCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027.

FREE dealership!! Receive $25.00 orders keep $15.00! Hottest pulling circular around! For complete FREE dealership send long stamped self-addressed envelope: Worldwide #18, Box 15940, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33318.

PERSONAL

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Hundreds of sincere members! All Ages! Free information! Write: Identity, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

ORIENTAL Ladies. Faithful, traditional, affectionate. Thousands seeking marriage, now! Cherry Blossoms, Box 1021DA, Honokaa, Hawaii 96727.

THERE IS NO CHARGE FOR THE ZIP CODE; please be sure to include your zip code when ordering merchandise from classified advertisements. You'll receive faster delivery.

MEET CHRISTIAN SINGLES. Love, Dating, Marriage—Local/Nationwide. Phone/Mail—No fees/Donations only: Box 9020-TM, Van Nuys, CA 91409.

TOYS, GAMES & ENTERTAINMENT

GAMES! Played-By-Mail. Ten titles including fantasy and science fiction. From the world's largest moderator of PBM games. Quality service since 1974. Send $1 for our 42 page catalogue. Write Schubel & Son, Inc., P.O. box 214848, Dept. A1, Sacramento, CA 95821.

KAISSA—The Game from Gor—one true step beyond Chess. Gorean versions of cloth & wood—$15.00, Earthen version in Limited Edition, Bronze & wood—$1500.00. All postage & handling pd. by Port Kar Ind., 19644 S. Falcon Drive, Oregon City, Oregon 97045

TRAVEL

GHOSTS! Unique tour to England in search of ghosts/spirits. Escorted by psychic researcher. Free brochure: 800-227-3800 extension "ICTS" (24-hour toll-free service).

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Where else could you learn that the 1985 Australian National SF Con(vention) is being held in Seattle? Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send cons an SASE when writing. When calling cons, give your name & reason for calling first off. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

NOVEMBER, 1984

23-25—**Darkover Grand Council Meeting.** For info, write: **Box 8113, Silver Spring MD 20907.** Or phone: **(703) 273-6111** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Wilmington DE (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Radisson Hotel. Guests will include: Marion Zimmer (Darkover) Bradley, Katherine (Deryni) Kurtz. Foster. This is also Eastern Regional Mythopoeic Con.

23-25—**LosCon.** Hilton Hotel, Pasadena CA. Curt Siodmak, Forrest J. Ackerman, Bill Warren.

DECEMBER, 1984

7-9—**WindyCon, Box 432, Chicago IL 60690.** Schaumburg IL. Alan Dean Foster, A. J. Budrys, Gene Wolfe, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, P. Eisenstein, Joan H. Woods. The annual, traditional Chicago-area con.

28-30—**EveCon, Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001. (301) 272-0950.** McLean VA (near Washington DC). Low keyed (if early) "celebration of having survived 1984," which was ushered in by the first EveCon.

JANUARY, 1985

18-20—**RustyCon, Box 47132, Seattle WA 98146.** Gordon Eklund, Kevin Johnson, Steve Fahnestalk.

26-27—**ChimeraCon, c/o Wright, 102-D Todd, Carrboro NC 27510. (919) 967-3049.** Chapel Hill NC. K. E. Wagner, M. W. Weliman, Frances Garfield, Allen Wold, David Drake, M. A. Foster, Walter Meyers.

FEBRUARY, 1985

1-3—**Take my Con . . . Please, 6446 Colonial Knoll, Glen Burnie, MD 21061.** Diane Duane, artist Phil Foglio. Theme: Humor in SF. From the folks who brought us Brave New Con last year. Masquerade.

1-4—**Corflu, Box 590712, San Francisco CA 94159.** Napa CA. Suzanne (Suzle) Tompkins. The annual con by and for fanzine fans. Come and find out what original fandom was (and still is) all about.

15-17—**Boskone, c/o NESFA, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm, artist Carl Lundgren. The big Eastern regional convention (2000 to 3000 fans expected).

15-17—**ConTex, c/o Friends of Fandom, Box 772473, Houston TX 77215.** No more about this one yet.

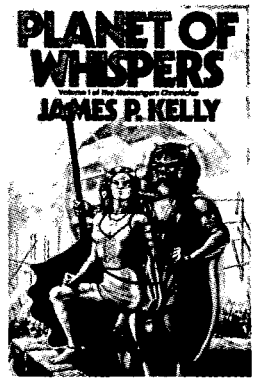
AUGUST, 1985

22-26—**AussieCon Two, 11863 W. Jefferson Blvd. #1, Culver City CA 90230.** Melbourne, Australia. The WorldCon for 1985. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, editor/fan Ted White. Join for $50 to the end of 1984.

30-Sep. 2—**ChiliCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766.** The North American SF Interim Con for 1985 (NASFIC's are held only in years when WorldCon is outside North America). 3000 fans expected.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE BEST SF



NEW SERIES

THE PLANET OF WHISPERS
by James P. Kelly

The first novel in "The Messengers Chronicles" is cause for shouting: "great science fiction adventure sure to appeal to fans of Andre Norton and Philip José Farmer!"

• WATCH FOR JAMES P. KELLY • ONE OF F & SF's and ASIMOV'S BEST

$14.95 Hardcover/Jacket illustration: Victoria Poyser

PHILIP K. DICK SPECIAL EDITION

TIME OUT OF JOINT
Afterword by Lou Stathis

Hugo and John Campbell Memorial Award-winner Philip K. Dick, author of **Bladerunner,** is "the greatest of science fiction writers."
—Washington Post-Book World

• A BLUEJAY SPECIAL EDITION—BUILT TO LAST, WITH ACID-FREE PAPER • OTHER PHILIP K. DICK MASTERWORKS: CLANS OF THE ALPHANE MOON and THE PENULTIMATE TRUTH

$6.95 Bluejay Special Edition/Cover illustration: Barclay Shaw

---

ILLUSTRATED CLASSIC

VENUS PLUS X
by Theodore Sturgeon

This novel's vision of utopia sparked a blaze of controversy when it first appeared. Today, it remains one of Sturgeon's greatest novels. **Rowena Morrill's** stunning illustrations are special to this edition.

• OTHER STURGEON IN BLUEJAY EDITIONS: ALIEN CARGO and THE STARS ARE THE STYX

$7.95 Illustrated Trade Paperback

BLUEJAY BOOKS INC.
James Frenkel, Publisher
130 West 42nd Street, Suite 514
New York, New York 10036

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RETURN TO THE OLD ONES' LAND OF ARVON
DARE TO BRAVE THE POWER THAT LIES WITHIN...
THE TRIUMPHANT CONCLUSION TO THE
STUNNING **WITCH WORLD** SAGA OF THE GRYPHON

GRYPHON'S EYRIE

BY ANDRÉ NORTON AND A.C. CRISPIN

FIRST PUBLICATION IN ANY FORM! ON SALE IN NOVEMBER

256 pages
$12.95

A TOR HARDCOVER DISTRIBUTED BY ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

TOR BOOKS WE'RE PART OF THE FUTURE

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED